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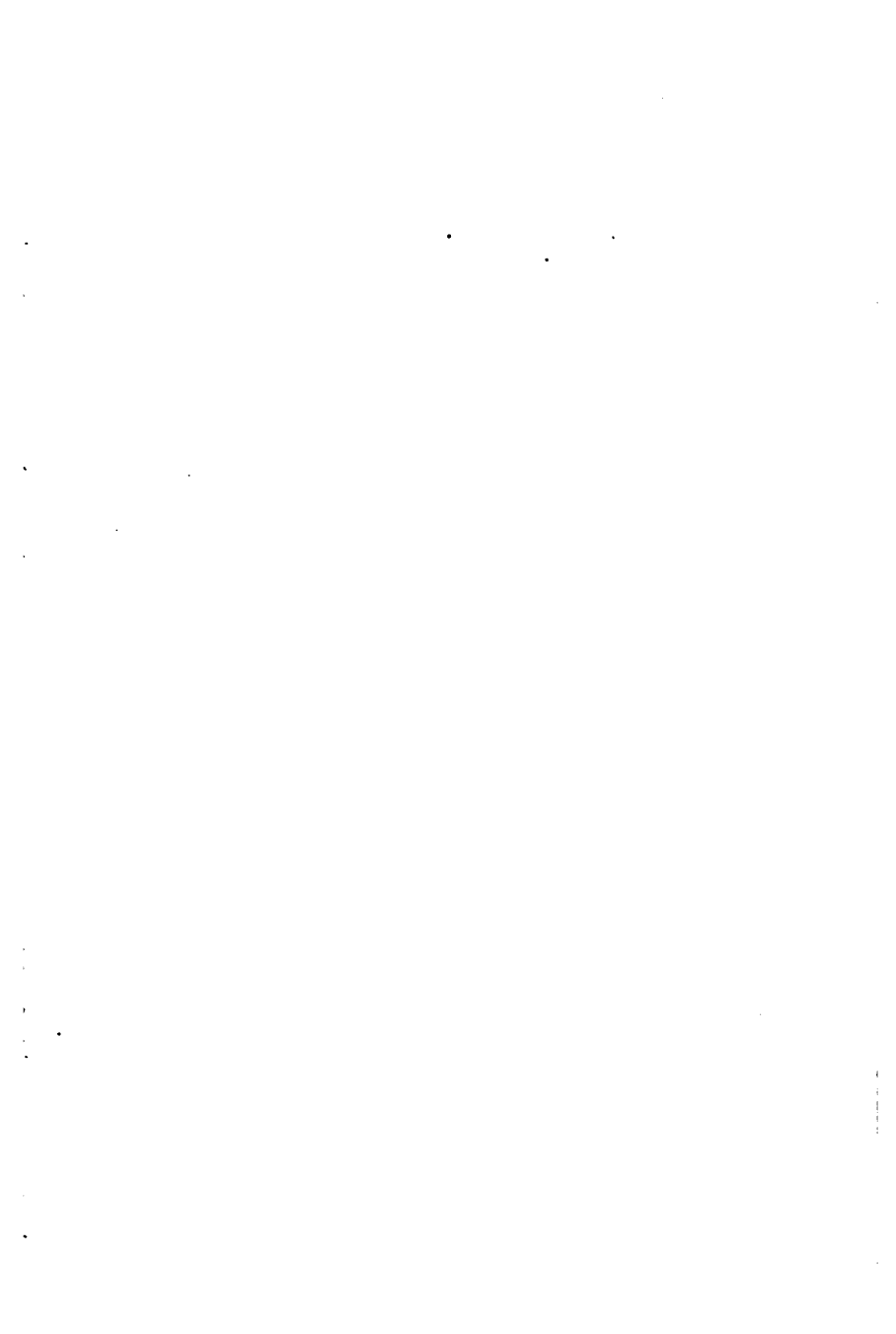
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A LITTLE MORE

William B. Maxwell
BY
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NEW YORK
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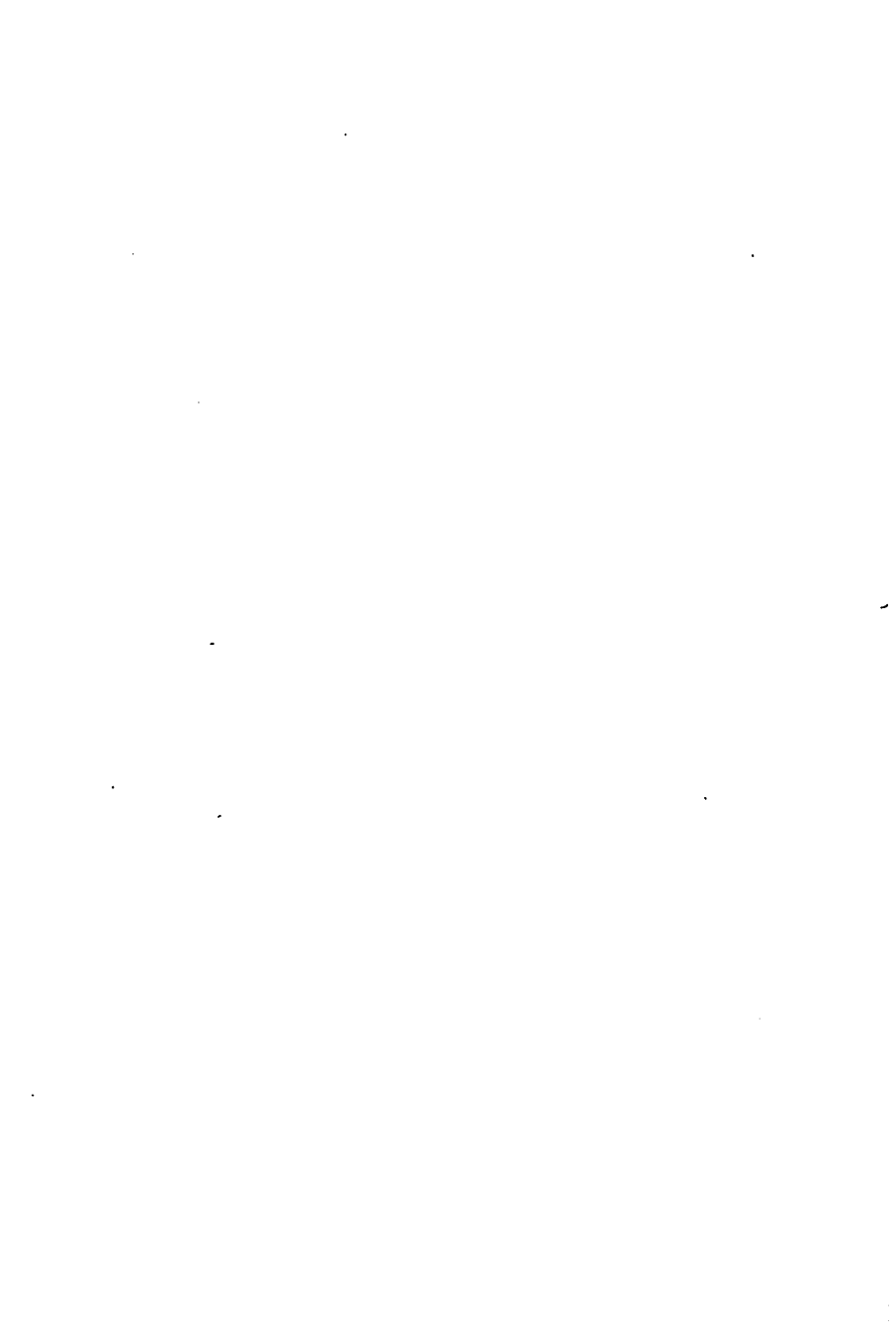
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A LITTLE MORE

CHAPTER I

IT was a bright spring evening in the year 1913, and the Welby family, with their two guests, had just sat down to dinner. Sarah, their faithful servant, put the soup tureen on the table before Mr. Welby; she took off the cover; and immediately his grey head and broad face vanished in an ascending stream of vapour.

"Well, it's hot enough, anyhow. I do like things served hot." His voice sounded cheerfully from the cloud; then one saw him again, beginning to ladle. "Miss Amabel, I hope you'll find this to your taste. . . . Here, my love . . . Violet . . . Primrose. . . . Now, Mr. Carillon, *your* turr. Ladies first—that's the rule, isn't it?"

"Indeed, yes."

Mr. Welby was a big healthy man of sixty-three. Habitually he had a jovial self-reliant manner, and spoke as though his words were not without importance, and as though he expected people to listen to them; but no observant person watching him as he handed round the soup plates and beamed upon the company could have failed to understand that he was by nature simple, honest, and kindly.

"When I took the bold step many years ago of purchasing this house," he continued, in his more solid conversational tone—"of purchasing the freehold of this house. Have I your attention, Mr. Carillon?"

"Indeed, yes."

"I say when I screwed up my courage and bought the house out and out, I was warned that the district might go down and the noise increase; but fortunately that hasn't happened. The road has remained as quiet and select as it ever was. Sitting here now as we are, is there anything to tell us that Clapham Junction is within a short walk and the traffic of greater London rolling all round us?"

"No, indeed."

"One would not believe it. And at the back of the house—well, I often make the remark: In our garden one might be in the depths of the country. You did not hear the trains just now when you were playing croquet?"

"They—ah—were only perceptible from time to time. I did hear them—but faintly."

"Well, we don't," said Mr. Welby, with jovial firmness. "Grown too accustomed to 'em, I suppose. The fact is, my dear Carillon"—and in his good-humour and general satisfaction he addressed the guest with almost exuberant friendliness—"the fact is, custom plays a very large part in life."

"Indeed, yes," said Mr. Carillon.

Mr. Carillon was a curate at the neighbouring church. Dark and thin, he had a strong earnest face and an unexpectedly diffident manner. He and the other guest, Miss Amabel Price, were listening very attentively to their host's conversation; but Miss Violet

Welby, Miss Primrose Welby, and Mr. Jack Welby were less scrupulously correct in their attitude. They were inclined to whisper and giggle. Their mother, a comfortable homely woman of sixty, looked at them with an expression of gentle reproof.

"Jack," she murmured in a low voice, "do be serious."

Jack, the beloved son, was about twenty-seven years of age, good-looking, easy of manner, with a pleasant ironical turn of humour. To a cynic he might have seemed extremely like a hundred thousand other office clerks who went into the City every morning and came out again every evening; but in the minds of his parents he was unique and glorious. Perhaps Miss Amabel, the ladylike graceful girl sitting at his side, had mentally placed him on even a higher pedestal.

"Some more soup?" asked Mr. Welby.

"No, indeed, no," said Mr. Carillon.

"Miss Amabel?"

"No, thank you, Mr. Welby."

"Mother?" He looked at each in turn. "Violet? Primrose? Jack? Then remove the tureen, Sarah. . . . Now listen, all of you, and I'll tell you a tale about the turbot."

"The turbot!" Mr. Carillon echoed the word politely.

"As I was going to the warehouse this morning, I saw it lying on the ice at Vinnings, and asked the price. '*Reserved*,' was the answer. At luncheon time I passed the shop and saw it again—the same turbot."

"And the same ice?" inquired Jack.

"At tea-time it was still there."

"But the ice had melted," suggested Jack.

"I looked at it."

"I wonder it didn't nod to you," said Jack. "You were getting such old friends."

"Don't be ridiculous, Jack," said his mother.

"The gentleman had not called to claim it, and they—— Ah, here it is."

Sarah had placed a large dish before him.

"And I think you'll say with me—unless I'm mistaken——" Mr. Welby became engrossed in carving the truly handsome fish. "Miss Amabel, thick or thin?"

"Oh, just as it comes, please," said Miss Amabel shyly.

"You are not afraid of a bit of skin?"

"She isn't afraid of anything," said Jack cheerily. "Not even of me."

"Jack," protested his sister Violet, "you really are——"

"Epicures, I understand," said Mr. Carillon, making small talk, "consider the skin an additional delicacy." Then, nervously apprehending that his turn was about to come round, "Oh, please don't help me too generously!"

"Nonsense!" said Mr. Welby. "At your age—with a hard day's work behind you!"

"And an evening service before you," added Miss Violet solicitously.

"We are simple folk, Carillon," said Mr. Welby, carving busily; "without pretensions or aspirations. You take us as you find us. You are good enough to give us your company at dinner——"

"No, it is you who are good enough to let me stay."

"I was saying——" Mr. Welby carved hard. "I've lost the thread. What was I saying?"

Jack prompted him. "You were saying we don't pretend."

"Yes. Just so. No pretence to be what we are not. You will not find here an affectation. . . . Primrose, I am taking out the bone for you as well as I can without injury to——There." And he handed the plate. "What was I saying?"

Jack prompted him again. "Last word, affectation."

"Just so. But what was I going to say?"

"No affectation of being any finer than we are."

"Yes, that was it," and Mr. Welby looked at his son in astonishment. "But how did you know?"

"My dear old dad, you've said it so often. Here, get on with the carving and I'll finish for you." And Jack assumed his father's manner, even imitated his voice for a few sentences, and then rattled on in so whimsical a burlesque of what Mr. Welby might have been intending to say that even the guests were unable to preserve their gravity.

"In a nut-shell," said Jack, "we are simple homely folk, but we venture to hope, Carillon, no worse for that. I like to be master in my own house, but I am too much of a philosopher to play the tyrant. No one can call me fashionable, or modern, or up-to-date; and my family love me, though they don't always show me sufficient respect. My boy Jack knows my wishes, and is not bad at heart. For that reason he does not regularly frequent racecourses and rarely comes home with the milk. My younger daughter, Primrose, is fond of music and very sentimental. Well, there's no harm in that—at her age."

"Oh, shut up!" giggled Primrose.

"She'll grow out of it. At present she is like the tender ivy clinging to the oak. She hasn't found an oak to cling to yet, but she keeps a sharp look-out in a shy, maidenly way."

"Shut up, I tell you!"

"My other daughter, Violet, is thought by some not to be ill-favoured."

"Really, really!" said Mr. Carillon, in sudden painful embarrassment.

"Violet's is perhaps the strongest mind of our little circle. She has inclinations towards literature. Her mother and I have done very well without the stimulus of book-reading; but I do not set my face against it, if not carried to excess."

And Jack wound up rapidly, in the style of a well-known public entertainer: "I was born in the year 1850, and my birthday is on March the 24th. Am I right, sir? Thank you."

"I didn't know I ever talked like that," said Mr. Welby, chuckling good-humouredly.

"No more you do," said Mrs. Welby, wiping from her eyes the tears that laughter had brought there.

"And if you did, why shouldn't you?" said Jack heartily. "You see, Carillon, they are not a chatty lot at the governor's place of business. The respected chiefs don't ask for prattle from the heads of departments. So he is bottling up his flow of conversation all day, and he likes to let it loose at dinner."

"A meal," said Mr. Carillon, "would be a dull thing without conversation."

"So bad for the digestion," said Mrs. Welby.

"In one point," said Mr. Welby, after a pause, "Jack

touched me off right enough. I do say, if a man of sixty-three isn't a philosopher he never will be. And without philosophy, what follows?"

But the others were not listening. They had begun to snigger again at some fresh facetiousness of Jack's. Mr. Welby raised his voice, repeating the words loudly and rather severely:

"What follows?"

"Roast mutton, sir," replied Sarah the maid as she brought the plates.

"A leg, dear," said Mrs. Welby.

"Any anecdote about the mutton, father?" asked the irrepressible Jack, and he imitated a sentimental reciter.

"I saw it once a long time ago. It was a little lamb, frisking and curvetting on the hillside. Next time I saw it, it was in a marsh near Sandwich golf links. It was heavier then, a quiet old sheep, glancing seawards with sad eyes; and yet no shadow of approaching doom—"

"Do be quiet," said Primrose, holding up her hand. "Listen."

In the roadway outside the house somebody had begun to play upon a harp, and its music came floating to them through the open windows. For a few moments they all sat silent, listening.

"Plays well," said Primrose, with the decision of one who thinks she knows what she talks about.

"You spoke of being unfashionable," said Mr. Carillon, in a sprightly tone, shaking off his diffidence. "But you are quite in the fashion to-night. An orchestra with our dinner!"

"Yes," cried Primrose. "They have a band at all

the smart restaurants. Do you remember, Vi, when we dined with the Lukers at the Pandora?"

"The crowd! The noise!" said Violet gaily. "One could hardly hear the band."

"Oh, I adored it," said Primrose. "But you had to keep time to it."

"I know," said Jack. "Eating to the measure! Getting in the right number of mouthfuls to each bar," and he waved an imaginary baton, and beat time as though he had been a conductor to the music outside the windows.

The music was stirring them all, each in a different way.

Meanwhile Sarah had brought in the mutton and uncovered it. Mr. Welby stood up to carve the joint. Then suddenly the invisible harp-player struck into the prelude of "Home, Sweet Home," and Mr. Welby stood motionless, with the large knife poised.

"Ah," he said. "Recognize the tune, mother?"

"Of course I do," said Mrs. Welby.

"And if I may say so," Mr. Carillon added, "no tune could be more appropriate to this house."

"Yes," said Mr. Welby quietly, "it is a happy home. . . . Ah!"

Outside the windows a woman's voice had begun to sing:

"Mid pleasures and palaces though we may roam,
Be it ever so humble, there's no place like home!"

"Sings well," said Primrose. "It's a trained voice."

"Hush!" said Mr. Welby, and he stood there without movement, listening.

"But the mutton, dear!"

"Hear the song through. . . . Hullo! What's up? They've stopped short."

The song had ceased abruptly. Why? Jack went to the window, and gave the explanation. "Moved on by the peeler."

"Poor beggars," said Mr. Welby, with indignation. "I call that very arbitrary of the policeman—interfere with people trying to earn an honest livelihood. Besides, it's *my* house. If I like to hear them outside—" While he spoke he was hastily screwing some coins into a bit of paper. "Here, Sarah, you good girl, run after 'em and give 'em this."

And the good girl Sarah dashed out of the house in pursuit of the musicians. She was not really a girl, although she had been one when she first entered the service of the Welbys. Now a valiant active woman of nearly fifty, she worked harder than ever. Of course, Mrs. Welby did a very considerable amount of the household work, as well as the cooking, and there was an invisible maiden who came of a morning and went of an evening; but Sarah, if necessary, would have carried the whole thing on her own unflinching shoulders. She had seen the young people grow up; she loved the whole family, and had proved her love in a hundred ways—most notably of all, by remaining with them after the receipt of her wonderful legacy. She was the family friend rather than the family servant.

She came back from her errand breathless and regretful, putting the screw of paper on the table by her master, and reporting that she was too late. The policeman had shepherded those parties round the

corner and out of sight, in the direction of the "Red Lion."

"They let 'em play outside the publics," said Sarah, "and I didn't dare follow further—with these vegetables getting cold on the sideboard."

The meal went on. There was chatter among the young people about neighbours, more especially residents in "the road"—Mrs. Castlemaine and her affected daughter, who lived at the Cedars; Mrs. Jobson, of Number 10, who dressed in such extravagant bright colours; and so on. But the gossip was all good-natured, without any malice in it.

Mrs. Welby, looking round the modestly furnished room, thought of the verses of that interrupted song. No place like home—wonderful moving words when they find an echo in one's own heart. Nothing in the room possessed a substantial market value; yet every familiar object, though bought "as cheap as cheap," gladdened her eyes. The arm-chair, the sideboard, that writing-table, were purchased at the same auction sale; the large framed photographs of herself and Mr. Welby had come as a birthday present; the water-colour drawings had been done by Primrose at school, before she dropped art and took up music; the pretty embroidery draping the chimney-piece had been designed and stitched by Violet.

She glanced at Violet, and thought with pride that she had never seen her looking handsomer. Violet was the beauty of the family, and to the mother's partial eye she seemed worthy of the title in far larger circles. Dark, plump, queenlike, she formed a fine contrast to Primrose, who was smaller, fairer, less inclined to take possession of people. Sometimes, and more especially

if there was an unattached young man present, Primrose would say innocently audacious things that made her herself blush. Such sallies rather shocked her mother, and more than once had caused Mr. Welby "to put his foot down" in company. But to-night there was no one here to stimulate the recklessness of Primrose. The only male guest was too plainly preoccupied.

The diffident but admiring glances that Mr. Carillon showered upon Violet were naturally noted by Mrs. Welby. Nor of course was Violet oblivious of them. There crept into her manner that quiet assumption of proprietorial rights which Mrs. Welby had occasionally deprecated. Violet's queenlike air announced that this earnest person in the black coat and Roman collar belonged to her, and she could not any longer trouble to conceal the fact.

Mrs. Welby looked at her son, her idol, and meditatively observed him too. He and Miss Amabel Price were whispering, or talking in so low a voice that it was as good as a whisper. Admiring glances were flashing at their part of the round table as freely as at Violet's segment.

The pudding had arrived, a trifle with custard, and Mr. Welby was distributing it.

"Now, Miss Price."

"Why Miss Price all of a sudden?" asked Jack, as he took the plate.

"Miss Amabel, then," said Mr. Welby, looking at her with a kind smile. "It shall be Miss Amabel, if you permit."

"I wish," she said shyly, "that you would call me Amabel, without the Miss."

"Oh, my dear," said Mrs. Welby, intervening, "we've

scarcely known you long enough to take the liberty."

Miss Amabel lowered her eyes, flushed slightly, and her pretty lips quivered. Something of coldness in Mrs. Welby's tone had surprised and wounded her. The face of Jack clouded, he shot a reproachful glance at his mother, and then beneath the table laid his hand on the girl's knee and held it there a moment or two, as if to prove that he at least felt as cordially towards her as ever.

"Some more trifle, Carillon?"

"No, thank you. You were too lavish. But it is quite delicious. Only one must remember the proverb, 'Enough is as good as a feast.'"

"The finest proverb in the English language," said Mr. Welby, with conviction. "I'd like to see it pinned into the hat of every young man beginning life—yes, and every old man finishing life either."

The pleasant meal was over. Already Jack had brought out his cigarette-case.

"May one smoke?" he asked, in an affectedly ceremonious style.

"Yes, but half a moment, please," said Mr. Welby. "Carillon, will you kindly—?"

Mr. Carillon rose and folded his hands, while the others all looked at the tablecloth.

"For what we have received may the Lord make us truly thankful."

"Amen," said Mr. Welby, with fervour, and he pushed back his chair. "My first Grace was even shorter: 'Thank God for my good dinner.' " Then, giving Mrs. Welby an affectionate pat on the arm: "And *this* was a good dinner, old lady." Then, turning to Sarah,

who had begun to clear the table: "And very nicely served, too."

The faces of Mrs. Welby and Sarah both brightened with pleasure. When you have worked hard to achieve results, a word of praise in recognition of your success is very grateful.

The others had trooped through the drawing-room and down the iron steps into the garden, to resume the golf-croquet. One could hear their young voices. Mr. Welby shouted to his wife from the hall:

"Going out. Back directly."

Then he snatched up his hat and hurried out of the house.

Although they had dined very early, dusk was falling when Mr. Welby returned from his brief walk. He paused in the hall to mop his forehead; he was warm, glowing externally and internally, pleased with himself and with everybody else.

In spite of the gathering shadows that began to fill the garden, his young people were still busily engaged at their golf-croquet. Their voices rang clear and joyous as they called to one another. Just now the game had become an innocent mania with them. They would play on until they could not see the hoops.

"Carillon," Jack shouted, "you're cheating. You have moved your ball from the wire."

"Oh, indeed, no!"

"Certainly not," said Violet. "He hasn't touched it. I have been standing close beside him all the time."

Mr. Welby smiled tolerantly, and he went to the dining room, where Sarah and his wife were putting

the last of the carefully-washed wine-glasses into the chiffonier. The room seemed almost dark after the twilight of the hall.

"Hullo!" he said gaily, "this is blind man's holiday with a vengeance. Light the gas, Sarah—or let me have a candle. I want to make up my accounts."

"Wherever have you been?" asked Mrs. Welby.

"Never you mind."

"But what *have* you been doing, really?"

"I shan't say," replied Mr. Welby, with gentle truculence.

Sarah had lit a candle, and by its light she saw her master's face beaming contentedly. She put the candle on the writing-table in the corner, nodded her head, and smiled.

"I'll be bound that I know what he's been doing," said Sarah. "He's been doing a kind action. I know that look on his face."

"Oh, pooh! You mind your own business, Sarah."

But Sarah was right. Mr. Welby presently confessed that he had run out to find that poor woman, and that, having found her, he had given her a little money.

"Oh, how good of you!" said Mrs. Welby, with feeling. "How good and kind!"

"Well, we ought to be kind to others, when they need kindness, oughtn't we?"

And he told them that the harp-player was a white-haired old man, and the singer a fine, big woman, who talked like a lady. She must have been a concert-singer in her time, perhaps rich and admired; then, probably through no fault of her own, things had gone wrong and she had dropped down to this. He was so

greatly touched by their forlorn aspect that he had given her quite as much as he could afford.

Then, to escape any further praise, from his wife or Sarah, he philosophized, saying how swiftly one sinks as soon as one has lost one's place on the comfortable surface of existence. What you have to-day may be taken from you to-morrow. You are useful and respected here, but you find yourself useless and unvalued there. You mean as well as ever, you feel as full of fight and work as you ever felt, but it all seems no good; and, try how you will, down you go. That's what one should always remember.

"And every word of it true," said Sarah, nodding her head appreciatively, as she went out of the room. "It's what I've often thought myself, without being able to find the words for it. But he brings it right home to one."

In the Welbys' household there was, of course, no nonsense about a servant not joining in the conversation. Besides, Sarah wasn't only just a servant. Mrs. Welby always said so to visitors. "We all regard her as a friend. And we have reason to. I verily believe that Sarah Brown would give us the clothes off her back or the money out of her bank, if we asked her."

Before Mr. Welby could settle down to his accounts, the male guest came in to say good-night and offer thanks for hospitable entertainment. He was confidently effusive in his thanks, and Mr. Welby told him heartily that he must soon come again.

"It would be an immense pleasure."

"Nay, nay," said Mr. Welby. "No ceremony. If you can put up with us as we are. My dear Carillon, as you have seen for yourself, we are very simple folk,

quite without—" And he checked himself, remembering that this had been already said.

"We mustn't detain him," said Violet, "because he has a late service, you know." She was waiting there to escort him to the front door; her manner of bringing him into the room had been entirely proprietorial, but it was tinged with motherliness as she led him out. "You have plenty of time," she said encouragingly. "So don't run, or do anything foolish of that sort. . . . And don't forget the parcel of circulars that we put on the hat-stand. . . . You have that envelope I gave you with the address of the washer-woman?"

"Yes, yes. Thank you so much—so very much."

When he had gone Violet went yawning up to bed. For her the evening was over. But just before mounting the stairs she looked into the dining-room again, and thanked her father for being so nice to Mr. Carillon.

"What did she mean by that?" asked Mr. Welby simply. "Aren't I always nice to people—at any rate, when they're guests in this house?"

"Of course you are," said Mrs. Welby. "But can't you see how it is?"

"What, something in the wind there? You surprise me. I hadn't a suspicion."

"Oh, it's very evident," said Mrs. Welby, smiling and bridling as the wisest women will on such occasions. "He can't keep his eyes off her. He follows her about like a little dog."

"Really? It seemed as if it was her following him about just now." Then Mr. Welby chuckled. "Well, well. Of course, I know we shall have to relinquish her some day—Primrose, too. And are you pleased? Are you contented with him?"

Mrs. Welby said she was at least gratified. You could not get away from the fact that in a sense it was a compliment to the whole family. One could scarcely look higher. For, say what you will, a clergyman has a rank—

“Oh, bother his rank,” said Mr. Welby jovially. “It’s the man himself *I* think of.”

“Violet,” said Mrs. Welby, “has enormous strength of character. There is no position that she would not fill. You trust Violet. If she decides in his favour, she will certainly make something of him—she will draw him out of his shell—she will develop him.”

“Good,” said Mr. Welby, picking up the old leather bag that he had carried to the City for thirty years, and bringing out his little books and memoranda.

But before he attacked his task of accountancy they had a few confidential words about Jack and Miss Amabel Price.

Mrs. Welby said there was nothing going on between those two. Jack insisted on her being asked here so often because he preferred her to any of his sisters’ girl friends; he was attracted by her, but he did not mean anything serious. She naturally admired Jack.

“But,” said Mr. Welby, “is that quite fair to the girl?”

“My dear,” said Mrs. Welby, “she’s only in the same boat with all other girls. For I never had one here that *didn’t* admire him. Besides, I gave Miss Price a hint at dinner that she must not nourish false hopes or draw hasty conclusions. It was when I spoke about us all calling her by her Christian name. It went over the heads of you and the others, as I intended; but I think

she understood—and possibly Jack too, in the sense of a warning that he must be careful.”

Then for a little while they talked of their paragon.

“Just sunshine about the house,” said Mr. Welby. “What form he was in to-night!”

“Wasn’t he? You don’t mind his chaff?”

“I *love* it. I like to feel we’re pals, as well as father and son”; and Mr. Welby passed his hand across his eyes and spoke in a husky voice. He reminded Mrs. Welby of how once she had brought the little naughty Jack for his father to give him a whipping, and of how she had cowered and trembled outside the door, torn with anguish while she waited for the sound of the smacks and the cries.

“But I never heard them,” she said.

“No, I couldn’t do it. ‘Spare the rod and spoil the child.’ Yes, but it’s something to be able to say that your child has grown into a man and you’ve never struck him once in all his life. I was soon glad I hadn’t done it”; and he alluded to that dreadful time when the little boy Jack was so dangerously ill that they thought they would lose him for ever.

“Oh, don’t go back to that,” said Mrs. Welby, shivering.

“No, I won’t. Except to think how much we have to be grateful for. Fate has been very kind to us, old lady”; and with a full and thankful heart Mr. Welby sat down at the writing-table.

Mrs. Welby sat in the armchair near him, and began to sew.

“I think I will have the gas now,” she said presently, and she got up and lit it.

“Yes, yes,” said Mr. Welby. “Bother the gas bill.

A penny saved is a penny gained—as these little books are proving to me very nicely. Nothing in the world like economy, but it mustn't be pushed too far.” And he blew out his candle, which was no longer needed now that the gas was on.

Soon he was deep in calculations. Mrs. Welby, sewing, spoke meditatively, to her needlework rather than to him.

“No, I could not contemplate *that* with satisfaction. She is not good enough for him. He can certainly do better. If there was any talk of an engagement between them I should have to ask you to put your foot down. The thing could not be allowed to go on.”

But the thing was going on now, at the bottom of the garden; and this very moment Amabel had talked of an engagement as already existing between them.

She and Jack were sitting on the bench beneath the mulberry tree by the end wall. Through the drooping branches they could see the lighted windows of the house and of the houses on each side of it; but except for these symbols of the narrow suburban life, they might have been—as Mr. Welby said—in the very depths of the country. For their whispered conversation a nobleman's park could not have served them any better than this small patch of garden. The fragrance of budded hawthorns floating to them from other gardens over the side walls could not have been sweeter had it come from thickets on a mountain slope. Springtime, Night, Solitude—what more can lovers ever want?

Amabel spoke of its being a long engagement, of the problem of ways and means, of the possible disapproval

of his parents. "Your mother is against it. You heard what she said to me at dinner." There did not seem much hope. And very sweetly Amabel asked if, in truth, he wanted to go on with it.

"Of course I do. Amabel, are you in earnest when you ask such a question?"

"Quite in earnest, Jack."

And she said a few words about her present employment. She was not altogether comfortable, in some respects. She felt that she might soon have to look for something else.

"You're so brave. Amabel, I hate to think of you working as you do. Oh, how I wish that when I take you in my arms, like this, I could hold you for ever and never let you go again."

"Jack, please don't," and she gently tried to release herself. "Jack, truly, I sometimes think it would be best for both of us if we just gave up hope—and—and agreed to part."

He could not see her face in the darkness, but it was all wet against his own, and he kissed her as he had never done before. The mere supposition of losing her seemed to him now dreadful and intolerable. His pretty slender girl, his own tremulous tearful clinging little girl. He pressed her close against him, and his emotion seemed to be at once ardent and fiercely despairing. And in her, too, as she yielded her lips, it was like the awakening of passion; she felt that if they themselves willed it, they could starve together, die together, and the whole world should not tear them out of each other's arms. For a little while they were quite silent.

Then she roused herself. "Let me go, please." She

dried her eyes. "Jack, if we're really going on with it—it mustn't be like this again. It must be just in the old way. This sort of thing would only upset me, and make it too difficult—I mean, my work." And she spoke very quietly and soberly. "Now I must go home to the lodgings."

"But you'll be true to me—you'll keep your faith in me?"

"Yes"; and she clung to him with all her strength, herself kissing in the new style. "Yes, I swear I'll be true to you. . . . Now, let me go. . . . *Please*"; and she stood up.

"You know that if I possessed the whole world, I'd give it to you?"

"My poor Jack, of course I do."

With his arm round her waist he led her over the lawn, guiding her carefully so that she should not knock her slender ankles against the croquet hoops.

"Say good-night to them for me, Jack. And please don't come with me."

"Only a little way. . . . As far as the Common."

And he took her out by the narrow passage at the side of the house, through the door on which by daylight one could read the rather too grand title: "Tradesmen's Entrance."

In the house Mr. Welby was still adding up figures, and Mrs. Welby stitching. Sarah downstairs had nearly finished her long day's work. Upstairs Violet lay drowsily reading a book, dark and plump, dignified even in bed; not really reading, but perhaps dreaming about the development of her property. Primrose, in another room, half undressed but still wakeful, feeling rather lonely and neglected too, was standing on a

chair in front of the toilet table and looking at her legs in the small swing mirror. During dull moments she often looked at her legs. From childhood they had been greatly praised by all privileged to see them. But that was the bother of it—one got so few chances of showing them, and to so few people. There had been a grand chance three years ago at the High School, when the girls were going to play "The Tempest" and she was allotted the part of Ariel. Only, her father had put his foot down as soon as he received a hint as to the costume—all leg,—with parents and relations to be present at the performance. It seemed a shame to rob her and everybody else of the harmless exhibition. Primrose shook out her fair curls, and sprang off the chair. She innocently believed that if she went on the professional stage, those legs of hers would make her fortune.

Jack and Amabel walked slowly down the quiet road; beyond the corner they were soon in the noise and the lamplight on crowded pavements, with the great trams clanking and hammering past and the sparks flashing from the overhead cables. Then they reached darkness and silence again. The Common seemed strangely silent, an immense waste, vague, mysterious, with black cavernous depths beneath the trees, and only a lamp twinkling here and there—its flame reflected on the asphalt path as in deep, still water.

All alone now, they joined their hands instinctively and walked on hand in hand.

Mr. Welby pushed his spectacles upwards to the middle of his forehead, and put away the little books. They had told him what he knew already, that he was

drawing very near to the goal of all his honest ambitions. When he had completed his next investment he would have put by sufficient to enable him to retire. Only another seventeen pounds per annum were needed to yield the income that he had aimed at from the very beginning of things. He spoke now of what the investment should be. He had selected two, and he hesitated in his choice.

"The Harbour Board debentures yield a full four per cent.," he said thoughtfully. "The Bed-rock Mortgage Trust only works out at three pounds one."

"A harbour sounds safe enough," said Mrs. Welby. "Go for that."

"But the Bed-rock is safer still. Let's stick to safety above everything else. That's what *we* want."

"Very well, dear."

And Mr. Welby spoke of Jack once more. What a piece of luck it was getting Jack safely established in that eminent insurance office, with a certain rise of salary every Christmas, if he behaved himself properly, as he would do. In his supreme satisfaction Mr. Welby rubbed his hands together.

"Thirty years hence there's no reason why Master Jack should not be in as good a position as I am myself."

Mrs. Welby gave an inaudible sigh.

CHAPTER II

AMABEL PRICE was an orphan, and her life-history a very simple one. From the time of leaving school she had been condemned by Fate to earn her own livelihood. A horrid old aunt might easily have modified the arrangements of Fate by giving her a small subsistence allowance; but she refrained from doing so. Thus Amabel, shrinkingly, with every fibre of her delicate body recoiling from contact with mean and common things, was forced to throw herself headlong into the crowded labour market, and there discover the current value of such goods as refined tastes, nice way of speaking, knowledge of French, German, shorthand, and typewriting—all the goods she had to offer. As she found, they were worth at this period, with luck, thirty shillings a week and afternoon tea; or, with further luck, thirty shillings and luncheon.

She had acted as assistant in flower shops and in bonnet shops, and now for some time she had been doing secretarial work in an office at Chelsea. Mr. Wright, her employer, was a middle-aged widower, a kind, considerate creature; if he had a fault, it was a fault shared with most people of kindly sanguine expansive temperament. He liked the sound of his own voice. And he seemed to like it especially when Amabel was there listening to it.

On some mornings he wasted huge blocks of time merely talking, instead of working.

"Never mind," he used to say, when she hinted that she ought to tackle the neglected letters. "Our talk, Miss Price, might not be worth three-halfpence to anybody else, if it was all set down and printed as a pamphlet; but it is doing us two good," and he smiled benignly. "We thrash out ideas by talking of them; and although our words may be chaff, there's always a little grain among them. When one has anything strange and difficult to do, it becomes easier, less *startling*, after one has talked about it. At first it may have appeared impossible; but then, as the talk renders it familiar to the mind—it, well, it gradually assumes the form of, I won't say a probability, but a definite possibility. That's sound philosophy, Miss Price."

Amabel herself smiled. "When you talk of philosophy like that, you remind me of another gentleman that I know."

"And who may that be?"

"It's a Mr. Welby."

"Welby? Any connection with Welby's Dairy Equipment?"

"No, I don't think so. He is in business, but not his own business. He is some kind of manager or head of a department in a City warehouse. But it's quite a little joke in his family that he fancies himself as a philosopher. He says that at his age one must either be a philosopher or a merry-andrew."

"And what is his age?"

"Oh, Mr. Welby is over sixty."

"Is he really? Over sixty!" and Mr. Wright smiled cheerfully. "Why, that's a great deal older than I am myself. I have the advantage of him by a number

of years." He seemed quite delighted at finding how old Mr. Welby was. "I myself am on the right side of fifty, Miss Price—considerably on the right side. In the forties, I can still call myself. And nowadays that isn't really counted as being old at all."

"Of course not," said Amabel politely.

"Of course not? You feel that yourself—young as you are. How old are you, Miss Price, exactly?"

Amabel said she was twenty-four now, adding as people always do that she would be a year older next birthday.

"I should scarcely have guessed you as so old as that. Twenty-four!" And he smiled at her. "You can't be expected to be very philosophical at twenty-four, Miss Price. And I can't be as philosophical at my age as I shall be no doubt when I reach the age of old what's-his-name—your friend the warehouseman." And Mr. Wright laughed gaily.

Little by little Amabel recognized that, kind and considerate as he was to everybody in the office, he was more so to her. This troubled her. Girls of Amabel's disposition hardly ever deceive themselves; they are not run away with by their own conceit; if they instinctively feel that anybody is falling in love with them, their instinct has nearly always warned them correctly.

There were days on which she thought she was wrong, but they were followed by days when she feared she was not wrong; and after the day when he summoned her to Bickley to do some typewriting for him at his private residence, she felt very little doubt that she had been right from the beginning. He took her all over the house and all round the garden, and up to the knoll of ground where you had the view of the Crystal

Palace; he introduced her to the children and their governess, to the maid-housekeeper and the other servants, even to the boy who did the knives and shoes; moreover, such an absurdly small amount of typewriting was accomplished during the whole visit.

"Only a little box, Miss Price," he said, when taking her down the gravel drive towards the railway station. "But size isn't everything. You can pack a lot of happiness into a very small space if you know how to set about it. In fact, the higher part of human life is not susceptible to measurement by three dimensions at all."

After this she felt greatly worried. Sometimes the atmosphere of the office seemed overcharged with secret intentions, and when he talked to her—thrashing out ideas, as he called it—he seemed insidiously to be leading her thoughts always in one direction. When he was busy at the larger writing-table she used to look up from her small desk and steal glances at his round reddish side-face, partially bald head, and robust shoulder. And if one of these glances met his kind frank blue eyes, she started guiltily. She felt guilty and distressed, because if he was really growing fond of her, she hated the idea of being forced to give him pain. If, as she believed, he meditated a proposal, she wanted to turn it aside before it was put into spoken words. But somehow she did not dare attempt this. After all, she might be wrong.

"I am not as young as I should like to be," said Mr. Wright; and Amabel, thinking "Oh, my goodness, now it's coming!" fell into a tongue-tied confusion of spirit.

"No," continued Mr. Wright, in his philosophical tone, "I wish I was younger, and less uninteresting.

However, this is a logical point—worth consideration. There's nobody in the world, probably, who isn't wishing for things he hasn't got. But one must strike a balance, I always think—and be thankful for small mercies." And he smiled at her. "One must think of the great universal benefits that we all enjoy."

"What are they?" asked Amabel helplessly.

"Why, that we live in this enlightened time, under a good government; with plenty in the land, and the whole world at peace. Miss Price, when I am inclined to crave for the unattainable, I try to thank Providence for these manifold blessings—for education too, modern sanitation, splendid railway services, efficient police, wise municipal enterprise—the convenience of the telephone, the electric light, and the Tube. They are within the reach of everybody. That, you know, is philosophy. But philosophy won't always help," and he looked at her very hard. "I am craving perhaps for the unattainable now. And philosophy won't help me, for I shall be broken-hearted if you say 'No.' Miss Price, will you be my wife?"

And he went on to speak of the advantages—small ones—but still advantages—that she would secure in such a marriage. He said the usual things about the inconvenience, the discomfort, and the peril even, that a pretty girl of twenty-four has to face when fighting the battle of life all by herself; but he said them with such generous feeling and delicacy of expression that Amabel was quite overwhelmed. Indeed, he pleaded for the answer he desired in so manly and yet gentle a style that the old proverb passed through her mind and seemed extraordinarily true. "Handsome is that handsome does." In spite of stoutness, redness, bald-

ness, Mr. Wright imploring her to marry him seemed as good-looking as need be. And she knew the advantages he spoke of. They were not small, but big. A girl cannot go into the labour market and live by herself in a lodging-house without thoroughly understanding what such advantages are.

But for Jack Welby, she would have said "Yes" instead of "No."

"Don't let this be final," said Mr. Wright, still pleading. "Take time. Though I have endeavoured to make the idea familiar, it still startles you. It may yet lose its repellent aspect—unless there is already somebody else."

And Amabel, with wet eyes and a catch in her breath, had to say that there was.

"Ah!" said Mr. Wright. Then he sat down at the big table and hid his red face in his hands.

After that Amabel could not, of course, remain in his employment. The nice good fellow begged her to stay and not consider his feelings; and when she went he wanted to assist her financially. But that, too, was of course impossible.

She had not much difficulty in finding another job. Her new employer was altogether different from her last one. This Mr. Hector Lyne was richer but less generous than Mr. Wright; a tall thin bachelor of thirty-five; hard-faced, except about the mouth, which was loose and unpleasing to look at. He bullied her.

"I am sorry I'm a little late," she said, settling down to her task.

"So am I. Because I have been waiting for you."

"Just five minutes," said Amabel in a flutter, "I see by your clock there."

"One can get through a lot in five minutes."

"I know one can," said Amabel nervously, arranging her things and making ready. "I always go by the church clock on Clapham Common, but it has stopped. And for the first time this morning the 'buses were all crowded—inside and out. I stood there, and they went by, one after another, before—"

He made an irritated exclamation. "Miss Price, you have wasted five minutes of my time. Are you going to waste five more minutes while you explain why you wasted the first five?"

"Sorry." And Amabel lowered her head over the notebook.

This was Mr. Lyme's way. He was going into Parliament; he had a career before him. He meant to do very well in the world, and he always took advantage, in every possible manner, of defenceless people. He bullied Amabel that morning and he went on doing it.

But instinct told her that he was not oblivious of her youth and sex, or of the attractiveness that the combination of these attributes usually possesses. Soon he mingled nasty little kindnesses in his general harsh methods—as, for instance, offering her sweets out of a box and touching her fingers when she helped herself. Then he gave her sugar plums of complimentary speech that made her blush, while he sat looking at her, watching the effect of his words.

He said he admired her very much. But he was not like Mr. Wright. He did not mean marriage. He only meant week-ends at Brighton, and a new frock or two, when they were to be obtained cheaply, at the summer sales. He tried to make her understand what was in

his mind, but she refused to show she understood, desperately clinging to her employment, with its thirty shillings a week and afternoon tea, and trying to make him understand that if she admitted she understood she would have to give it up and go.

Understanding at last, he was angry ; and he became definitely and consistently unkind.

All this made her unhappy, but she strove to keep most of it from Jack.

CHAPTER III

IT had been long a tradition in the family that Mr. Welby was a good whip. Mrs. Welby always said so, and he said so himself. He knew no greater treat than to exercise this accomplishment by hiring the well-known brown horse and the neat T-cart from Messrs. Manger, of the Junction Road, and taking Mrs. Welby for a Saturday afternoon drive. Now on this Saturday he had had his drive; but Mrs. Welby, occupied by household duties, had been compelled to forego the excursion and send in her place one of Mr. Welby's male friends.

"I wish you could have come," said Mr. Welby at dinner; "especially when I saw that the rain was going to hold off. Across Wimbledon way the dark clouds were banking up something terrific. The very horse seemed to know it was coming, and I said to Jobson, 'We shall catch it before we're much older'; and then I thought, 'After all, I'm glad she isn't with us.' But it seemed to clear off when we got further on. Mind you, we shall have it yet—before nightfall. You can feel it in the atmosphere."

And indeed it was a queer oppressive sort of evening, not the slightest movement in the warm air of the garden and a heavy stagnant silence outside in the road.

"The barometer," said Mr. Carillon, "has proved a very untrustworthy guide this last fortnight. The vicar keeps one of those pocket aneroids on his study table, but I have almost given up consulting it."

The same party was assembled round the dinner-table as on that night a month ago when Mr. Welby brought home the turbot. Since then Mr. Carillon had been a frequent visitor; and, much of his shyness having worn off, he showed an easier manner and talked more freely. Amabel too had been here once or twice, but she had not become talkative. To-night, as Mrs. Welby noticed, she looked pale and headachy. But, except for Mr. Welby, refreshed by his outing, they all seemed to be suffering from a certain languor or lassitude.

Mr. Welby, continuing to narrate the events of the afternoon, described how the drive terminated at Epsom with a distant view of "the great Derby racecourse." Already preparations for next week's festival were being made on the downs, and Mr. Welby spoke sadly of all the foolish people who would compose the racing crowd and of all the money that would be lost.

"Lost and won," said Jack. "They don't *all* lose, you know."

"They do—in the long run," said Mr. Welby. And he told them how his friend Jobson had reminded him of something that he himself had read in print, as an instance of profligate waste. Enough champagne was drunk on Derby day to float a battleship.

"Only it isn't real champagne," said Jack cynically.

"No," said Mr. Carillon. "I have seen it further stated that champagne consumed during one London season could not possibly be made from the entire harvest of the grape vines throughout France."

"Or the harvest of the gooseberry bushes, either," said Jack contemptuously. "Chemicals. Just chemicals."

"Yes, my friend Jobson spoke of the meretricious

stuff they sell for claret also," said Mr. Welby. "As soon as his head was turned towards home—I am speaking of the horse—he seemed to go literally wild. Passing through Ewell he did one of his quick swerves, and he'd have taken me wrong side of the lamp-post, if I hadn't——" And Mr. Welby indicated in pantomime his masterly handling of the reins.

The sound of a strident voice became audible, growing nearer and louder. It was a boy hurrying down the quiet road with the final edition of the evening newspaper. "All the winners! Hurst Park results! All the winners!" Jack unceremoniously left the table and went out to buy a paper.

"You see," said Mr. Carillon, "those yelling cries are permitted without protest. It would be far better if the police interfered with that sort of song. Perhaps it is uncharitable, but I sometimes think it would be a blessing if horse-racing were abolished throughout the width and breadth of the land. Statesmen must surely see that betting is a temptation that encourages one of the worst passions—the greed for gain which has not been earned by effort. It is the hundred-to-one chance, the notion of a pocketful of coin all in a moment, that leads mere lads sometimes— Why, at our Boys' Brigade——"

"We had a jobbing gardener who was ruined by it," said Mrs. Welby.

"Half the clerks in the City!" said Mr. Welby. "Vi—two slices?"

"One is sufficient."

Jack, returning with a sombre air, tossed the newspaper upon the sideboard and resumed his seat.

"Not even placed," he whispered to Amabel. "I must have been born wise. I wasn't born the other thing."

"There's a second proverb about luck," whispered Amabel, rather reproachfully.

"Of course there is," said Jack. "Lucky in love—what?" And he patted her hand, unobserved by anybody else.

Mr. Carillon went on didactically: "Apart from the restlessness and the unsettling habit of mind it induces, it leads to desires for unobtainable things. One may say of it, in the French phrase, the appetite grows in eating."

"Quite so," said Jack curtly. "But what's it? Bunker's Nerve Tonic?"

"We started from betting," Carillon explained. "But I am generalizing now in a tentative way about the prevalent wish for money."

"Oh, very wrong and foolish," said Jack, with a scornful laugh.

"If they really knew, perhaps they wouldn't. It is among the lessons derived from this very parish. Often I have observed the hardening, deteriorating effect of prosperity. I do not mean great wealth, because then it is so obvious. And in the parish, as you are aware, there is no case of extreme affluence."

Violet interrupted him with unusual animation. "Mrs. Verity! What about *her*? Have you seen their lovely new car?"

"And Mrs. Fardell!" cried Primrose, even more sharply. "That woman must spend a fortune on dress. For I know she goes to the most expensive shops. Her hats! They make one sick with envy."

"Primrose," said Mr. Welby, "that's not a pretty word on your lips, my dear. It's a word I don't care to hear uttered, even in joke."

"Of course I didn't mean it really."

"No, I should hope not."

"And I don't say the woman hasn't taste, but she's becoming more recklessly gorgeous in church every week. Amabel, did you see her hat last Sunday?"

"No, I didn't notice."

"I am quite sure that Miss Price," said Mr. Carillon, smiling at her approvingly, "was better employed."

"That means listening to your sermon, eh?" said Jack. "Fire ahead, then. But don't use it all. Save some for next Sunday."

"You are too bad"—and Carillon turned to Mr. Welby. "Among the industrious classes, the real working people, I have observed that when their material circumstances improve, they begin to fail spiritually."

"Leave off work and take to drink?" suggested Mr. Welby.

"No, I did not quite mean that. No. I hesitate for an illustration. But when you expect them to rise to improved conditions of mind because of largely increased bodily comfort, they go downward. They are no longer satisfied—they become greedy—they ask for further advancement."

"There you are again," said Mr. Welby. "Philosophy! Want of the right sort of education, too. Faddism—modern cleverness instead of old-fashioned common-sense. It is so easy to lose sight of essentials. Money is necessary, to buy necessities."

"Oh, quite epigrammatic," said Jack sneeringly.

"The rest," said his father firmly, "is just superfluous. That is, if one has enough."

"Yes," said the curate, with conviction, "if one is contented one is rich. You have summed it up. Yet I often think how much one might do with only a small additional sum." And in a feeling manner he quoted poetry. "The little more and how much it is, the little less and what worlds away."

"Say that again," said Jack. "That's good."

And Mr. Carillon repeated in the same tone: "The little more and how much it is'!"

"By Jove! that's true. The little more, and how much it is."

"Browning."

"I don't care who said it, it's devilish good. Isn't it, mother?"

Mrs. Welby sighed, and for a few moments everyone was silent, thinking.

"Oh, of course," said old Welby, breaking the silence jovially. "Of course, we could all do with a little more. We'd all be ready to enlarge our plans a bit."

"By Jove, yes," said Jack, with feeling. "I know, if I have drawn the winning number in the Calcutta sweep—"

"And if I get anything out of the *Home Notes* Literary Competition," said Violet.

"I never build on it," said Mrs. Welby; "but if a little venture of mine *should* turn up trumps——"

"What's this?" Mr. Welby looked from one to another in astonishment. "Let me get my bearings, please," and he addressed Jack severely. "Calcutta sweep? D'you mean the great Derby lottery? Why,

that's reserved for people connected with India. How can you——"

"Very simply," said Jack. "A fellow I know knows a fellow who happens to be connected with India, and being an obliging fellow, he has procured me a ticket—Number 612854. Remember it in your prayers, Carillon."

"Don't be profane," said Violet.

"Attend to me, please," and Mr. Welby continued in his heaviest voice: "If you win, Jack, how much do you expect to get?"

"Thirty thousand of the best."

Mr. Welby shrugged his shoulders contemptuously. "Thirty thousand to one, eh? You've got plenty against you."

"Yes, but somebody's going to win. Why not me, just for a change—not to make a practice of it—only this year?"

"Of course," said Mrs. Welby gently, "it's all a matter of luck."

"You too, mother," and Mr. Welby looked at her keenly and reproachfully. Then he forced himself to smile. "I'm ashamed of you. You out for a bit of luck too?"

"Well, isn't it time?" said Mrs. Welby, with a sigh.

Mr. Welby frowned. The drift that the talk had taken was extremely distasteful to him; he had been irritated by Jack's foolishness about the lottery ticket, and his pride was a little wounded by what Jack's mother had just said. But it would be wrong on his part to take any of their idle words seriously. For the second time he compelled himself to make light of everything.

"Luck," he said, with a laugh, "isn't coming down this road."

"It has come down the road once, sir," said Sarah the maid.

"Ah, to be sure. You are the lucky one, Sarah. No one ever left *me* money. Carillon, you heard of the legacy to our friend here?"

"Yes, indeed."

"She hadn't any expectations from her aunt—never guessed till the lawyers wrote to her. Like a fairy tale!"

Sarah at the sideboard nodded her head affirmatively, and smiled as she stacked the pudding plates.

"Quite a nice little lump of money, too, Sarah."

"But it hasn't made me too proud to do my work, sir."

"Bravo, Sarah! Well answered," said Mr. Welby. "*That's* the right sentiment."

Primrose with her elbows on the table and her sharp little chin in her hands spoke meditatively, almost dreamily. "If a fairy came to me, I know what I should ask for."

"Oh, we'd all be ready for the fairy," said Violet.

"No doubt you would," said Mr. Welby. "How you all harp on the same silly string!" Then determining to humour their nonsense, he asked Amable Price what she would say to the fairy.

"I should ask for a kinder master."

"He's not your master," said Jack warmly.

"Then a kinder employer."

Mr. Welby turned to his wife and looked at her fondly.

"And what would *you* have to ask for?"

"Oh, for so many many things," said Mrs. Welby in a quiet intense voice.

"Well, that's a staggerer," said Mr. Welby, and he sat back in his chair and stared at her. His broad face had flushed from surprise and pain. But she, quite unconscious of how deeply she had wounded him by her unexpected answer, was looking fixedly at the tablecloth. Her whole aspect was that of a person who has passed from the world of external facts to the world of dreams and imaginings; carried away by her thoughts, she had left this snug familiar room and was perhaps already far away. He glanced round the table and saw, although less clearly significant, a similar expression on the faces of the others. They were all of them engrossed by their own thoughts. Nobody spoke or even seemed about to speak, and during this second long pause the silence became strangely oppressive to Mr. Welby.

"Well, what is it?" he said at last. "An angel passing—or somebody going over our graves?"

"No," said Sarah, thinking he addressed her, but not altogether catching his words. "No, sir, I think it's a telegram. Yes, there's the front door bell. I saw the boy at the gate."

She went out and returned with the telegram.

"He's waiting for an answer."

Mr. Welby put on his spectacles, read the telegram, and made an exclamation of disgust or annoyance. "Botheration. Look here, mother, it's from your cousin Nicholas. He's coming this evening. . . . No answer, Sarah."

"Well, dear me, really, upon my word," said Mrs.

Welby, showing that the news roused her from her musings in no very pleasant manner.

"There," said Mr. Welby, taking off his spectacles and wiping them before he put them away; "there, my dear Carillon, there, if you like, is a rich man who doesn't make much use of his money."

"He doesn't use it for his cousins, anyhow," said Jack.

"Nor for himself, either," said Mr. Welby. "Did you ever see him in a new suit of clothes or a decent topper?"

"Nicholas is eccentric," said Mrs. Welby.

"He's *mean*," said her husband firmly. "He's the meanest person I've ever encountered in all my experience. And when you think, Carillon, that he could buy up this road from end to end."

"A landed proprietor?"

"No. Holds controlling interest in some Austrian sulphur mines and subsidiary enterprises. Oh, I don't put him forward as a millionaire—but the old beggar must be worth anything between a hundred to two hundred thousand pounds."

"Four to eight thousand a year," said Mr. Carillon sympathetically.

"And, I suppose, spends——"

"Half nothing," said Jack.

"I don't think," said Carillon, "that I have had the pleasure of meeting the old gentleman, have I?"

"No," said Violet. "He has left us alone lately. He only comes to us from time to time, and, really, we don't know why he troubles to do it."

"He just sits over there by the corner of the side-

board," said Mr. Welby, "and never opens his mouth, except to sip some whisky and water."

Then in unsparing terms they all told Mr. Carillon of the varied shabbinesses and meannesses of this eccentric cousin. Age had not softened him. He grew harder every year. Knowing that he had long since quarrelled with every one connected to him, feeling compassionate because of his utter loneliness, they had in the beginning welcomed him here cordially and affectionately. The girls and Jack had paid him many little attentions, trying to soothe and cheer him by their sprightly ways—in a word, trying to win his heart. But it was all no use. He neither recognized their kind intentions nor the effort that they cost. Now for a long time they had given him up as a bad job. He might be as neglectful as he pleased, and they did not care. On his occasional visits they supported his presence as best they could; they were still genuinely sorry for him, but they could not any more pretend to be fond of him. It made no difference to him, of course, for he had shown plainly that he neither courted nor valued their affection.

Mrs. Welby alone defended his character, and the emphasis she employed showed that she was only doing it from a sense of duty.

"We must be fair," she said. "In justice we must remember that he *owes* us nothing. He is not a *blood* relation. We have no *right* to expect anything from him."

"But perhaps," said Mr. Carillon, "although he is so neglectful now, he may perhaps intend to show his appreciation of your kindness at a later date?"

"The date's a mighty long time coming."

"I mean, after he is gone," said Carillon hopefully. "He may intend to make it up to you then."

"Oh, Lord, no! We've no expectations of *that* sort. Not much," and Mr. Welby laughed rather bitterly. "You don't know him, Carillon. Years ago we used to tell him the children's birthdays—just for fun—and he'd write them down in his pocket-book. But not a box of sweets—not a word—when the birthdays came round. And the same thing at Christmas. Not a penny card of good wishes!"

"He's Primrose's godfather," said Mrs. Welby; "but you'll scarcely credit it, he even came to the christening empty-handed."

"Well, really?"

"But mother," said Primrose, with an unmirthful laugh, "don't forget the famous present from Naples."

"Lor', no," said Mr. Welby. "Fetch it, Prim, and show it to him."

Primrose ran into the drawing-room, and came back with a wretched little vase. It was handed round the table while they all mocked at it.

"Replica in miniature of a Pompeian urn, I suppose," said Carillon, handling the thing.

"Neatly encrusted with lava," said Jack scoffingly. "Very chaste and choice."

"And that is the only present the old gentleman ever gave you?" said Mr. Carillon, returning it to its owner. "Well, really?"

"I tell you," said Jack, "he's hot stuff—as a godfather."

"Never mind, Prim," said Mr. Welby firmly. "We don't want his presents. No," and he rose from the table and stretched himself, "we don't want presents or

anything else from him. We can stand on our own legs, I'm glad to say, without assistance from him or any one else."

Primrose was taking her horrid little vase back to the drawing-room; but her mother stopped her, and told her to put it on the sideboard, where their visitor would see it.

"Yes," said Mr. Welby, with a derisive chuckle, "stick it up as conspicuous as you can—so's he can't miss seeing it. Leave it there, to shame him—eh, mother? Good idea of yours."

"No, that wasn't my idea at all," said Mrs. Welby. "I think it will gratify him, when he finds it there."

"Gratify him?"

"My dear," said Mrs. Welby, "I hate pretence quite as much as you do. But one must behave in a dignified and becoming manner. There's no sense in wounding people's feelings. If we receive him, we can't do otherwise than receive him properly. We have always done so till now, and we must go on doing so."

"Oh, very well. I dare say you're right."

"He has always been counted as my cousin. And I have my pride, as well as you, yours."

"Just so. But why should you speak to me like that?"

The young people had languidly strolled to the garden, and Mr. Welby, shrugging his shoulders, followed them as far as the iron steps of the verandah. Something of sharpness or latent irritation in his wife's tone had wounded him again. For the third time in an hour she had caused him momentary distress. He stood at the top of the steps, fumbling in a side pocket for his pipe, and feeling uncomfortable, as though the dinner

had not agreed with him. But as he thought of it, he understood that the food had been as good as usual; it was the conversation that had gone wrong. He had sat down to table in the happiest frame of mind; indeed there were valid reasons why to-night of all nights he should feel happy and contented; but then the silly talk had begun, gradually getting upon his nerves, insidiously upsetting him. He lit his pipe, took a puff or two, and realized that he had terminated the meal very abruptly; he had just broken up the party, without the customary polite and hospitable words—without apology to the guests—without having grace after meat. He should have remembered at least to ask Carillon to say grace. He roused himself, and spoke loudly and cheerily to the young people on the lawn.

“Well, the storm seems blowing over again. Are you going to have your game?”

“Yes, come on, you slackers,” said Jack. “Carillon, we’ll give you your revenge.”

“Delighted,” said Mr. Carillon, and he spoke to Violet softly and tenderly. “That is, if you’ll consent to be my partner.”

“If you’ll put up with me,” said Violet. “I play so badly.”

“Oh, for better for worse,” said Jack. “Croquet’s like marriage. No change of partners. . . . Amabel! Try your hand this time, won’t you?”

“No, I’ll watch. Play with Primrose.”

“Then come on, Prim.”

Mr. Welby smiled. He was nearly himself again now. And he went back to the dining room to find his wife and have a quiet chat with her. He felt a craving to sweep away the slightest cloud of misunder-

standing. But Mrs. Welby was busily engaged with Sarah in clearing the dinner-table.

"My dear, I want you."

"One minute," said Mrs. Welby. "I'm just finishing. There, Sarah, two make shorter work than one."

"Yes, but can't she——"

"Yes," said Mrs. Welby; "but it's her evening out. I'm only helping to get through with it the quicker. Now, Sarah, off you go," and she continued to load Sarah's tray with glasses and napkins.

Mr. Welby sat in his armchair, the only armchair that the room contained, and watched them bustling to and fro. Sarah carried out the loaded tray and returned with it empty. They loaded it again, they put things in drawers of the sideboard, they opened or shut the sideboard doors. There seemed an immense lot of work to be done in removing all signs of dinner and making the room neat and tidy. But at last they had finished; Sarah was going out with an empty tray—and that of course meant the end.

She paused at the door and pointed to the sideboard.

"The whisky's in there, ma'am. But there's not more than half a siphon of soda water."

"He doesn't take it," said Mr. Welby. "He prefers water. Run along."

Sarah, going, turned with suddenness, and spoke gravely:

"Ma'am! What about all that linen and the curtains?"

"Oh, dear," said Mrs. Welby plaintively. "I'd forgotten. Where are they?"

"I've put 'em all—laid out—in the spare room. Mind you, it's a lot, ma'am. They fairly fill the room."

"All right. I'll go up and tackle the job directly. I'll get through it somehow. . . . Now, dear. Did you wish to speak to me?"

She was pulling a chair across the room, and he asked her to draw it close and sit beside him; but she said she dared not sit down, with all the linen weighing on her mind. She placed the chair at the corner of the sideboard, in readiness for the expected visitor. Then she came behind the armchair and laid a hand on her husband's shoulder. He patted the hand affectionately.

"Our clerical friend and Violet!" he said. "Eh? That seems to be going exactly the way you anticipated?"

"Yes," said Mrs. Welby, without elation. "Yes, I suppose we can take that as settled. He hasn't spoken to you, has he?"

"No, I haven't given him a chance—purposely."

"He'll speak soon. Violet asked me again to beg you to be nice to him. Of course she meant, he needed a little encouragement from you as well as from her before he would say anything definite."

"Yes, that's all mighty fine, but before I'm called on to give him an answer I want to get our bearings fixed. You're satisfied?"

"Oh, yes," said Mrs. Welby, still without the slightest sign of elation. "Oh, yes. I admit I sometimes wish he wasn't quite so——" and she hesitated.

"Quite so what?"

"Well, I do sometimes wish he had a little more dash and go."

"Dash and go!" Mr. Welby echoed the words in blank surprise. "But he's a curate!"

"I know," and Mrs. Welby spoke reflectingly. "I

know. That's true. But there's so much powerful, almost commanding character in Violet." Then she resumed a tone of cheerfulness. "Yes, that's all right. Yes, I *am* satisfied. It's the other thing that bothers me."

"Jack and Miss Price?"

"Yes, I'm disappointed with what I see coming there; for I believe it *is* coming, in spite of the many hints I've dropped."

"You don't take to her? She's a lady, all said and done. Pretty little thing, too."

"I know. But she's *not* good enough for Jack. She's in rather a false position also. Jack feels that himself. It is saddening him. You know he used to be all gaiety—keeping up all our spirits."

"Oh, he didn't seem in such bad form at dinner."

"Acting," said Mrs. Welby, with admiration, "just acting! He's so *brave*. He's very brave, Jack is. No one who doesn't know can guess the real good in Jack. He's *splendid*, at heart."

"Well, exactly."

"But it would be dreadful if he took a wrong turn, just for want of the advantages he deserves."

"If you don't think she's the right sort for him, the sooner we stop it the better."

"Of course they're very much in love with each other."

"They are?"

"You can see it in their faces. She follows him with her eyes. There are times when I'm almost afraid of their doing something foolish."

"How d'you mean?"

"Taking the law into their own hands. Ah well,"

and Mrs. Welby gave a long sigh. "I suppose it is destiny. We don't choose. What we have to do we must."

As if to illustrate the truth of these words, Sarah appeared in the doorway reminding her that she had to do the linen. Sarah was dressed in hat and walking costume, on the point of going out.

"The iron's hot, ma'am, and I've put the marking ink on the mantelpiece. You'll find all those small towels spread over the sofa. The antimacassars are on the floor." And observing Mrs. Welby's weary air, the good creature had one of her usual generous impulses. "Ma'am, shall I stop to help you?"

"No, no. My kind Sarah. I wouldn't hear of it. Go at once."

And almost regretfully Sarah went out.

"Another thing I wanted to speak of was this," said Mr. Welby. "I'd no chance to tell you this afternoon. But I did that bit of business before I came home to-day. Told 'em to buy the Trust Stock, three hundred and fifty of it—you remember, the other one!"

"That's the one with the smaller interest?"

"Yes. You know the old maxim. High interest means poor security. That's our watchword, isn't it?" And he said the word with relish. "Security! Well, we've got it, old girl. We're secure in our competence. To-day I've reached the mark I always set myself. Five hundred a year put by, that nothing and nobody can touch."

Standing behind his chair, she looked down at the pencilled figures on a half sheet of note-paper.

"Allowing the assessable value of this house, our invested capital yields the five hundred—and three

pounds odd—per annum. I could retire to-morrow if I wanted to.”

“And so you ought. No one has earned his rest better than you have.”

“Don’t feel to want it yet.”

“When you do retire,” said Mrs. Welby meditatively, “I suppose there’s no chance of their making an exception in your special case, and giving you some sort of pension?”

“No, certainly not. That’d be beyond our bargain. I’ve enjoyed my high salary and the commissions, all through my service, according to the firm’s system. They can’t pay twice over.”

“No, of course not. I was only wondering.”

“Besides——” And he got up and walked about the room. “Living in our own freehold house, with means of our very own! It’s what we aimed at—what I promised you I’d reach one day. Well, we’re there. I’ve got you there.” And he looked at her, expecting the usual little outburst of mingled praise and gratitude. But to-night it was not forthcoming.

“Yes,” she said wistfully. “It was only Mr. Carillon set me thinking. Something he said. How a small addition sometimes——”

“Oh, bother that,” said Mr. Welby, disappointed and crestfallen. “What do you want? Isn’t it enough?”

“Yes, for ourselves, ample; but for *them*——” and she glanced in the direction of the garden. “It is only for them that I ever wish for more.”

“But in what way?”

“Well, if we could have sent Violet to Paris—to finish her.”

"Paris would finish her—or anybody else," said Mr. Welby, trying to hide his mortification under a tone of ponderous jocularly.

"And if we could send Primrose to Vienna for music."

"Send her to the moon for green cheese."

"One's only young once. And youth's the time that money can do so much. They never complain; but they must see it as plainly as I do—how their little pleasures, hopes, and chances are sacrificed."

"Sacrificed!"

"There's a ball to-night that Primrose might have gone to. Kensington Town Hall! She'd have met that young Perkins. He's well off; he's a *nice* boy. He was taken with her, and was ready to follow it up. Naturally Prim wanted to go to the dance."

"Then why didn't you let her go?"

"My dear, how could I? I tried my hardest to manage it. I went into everything: the alterations to her dress, and all the little odds and ends; and then of course the taxicab to and fro—something for the harpy in the ladies' cloak-room. It couldn't possibly be done under a couple of pounds. Perhaps anybody would say cheap for such a treat—but too expensive for us. Impossible! Primrose came to me and said: 'Mother, it doesn't matter. I give it up.' If you had heard the way she said it. It was like a blow on my heart."

Mr. Welby resumed his seat in the armchair, and sat looking at her. She came to him, and put her hands on his shoulders.

"I ought to have kept all this to myself. Has it sounded ungrateful? Don't think *that*. Nothing but admiration and gratitude to you." She was about to

stoop to kiss him, but she checked herself. "You ought to buy yourself a new pipe. That old one is becoming a disgrace."

He answered sadly. "Good pipes are like good wives: the older they are the sweeter they become."

Mrs. Welby kissed him. "God bless you—best of husbands, best of men. There! Now if you take my advice, you'll have a nap, or you'll be too tired to put up with Nicholas. You've had a long day, and driving always fatigues you. . . . Oh, my goodness! That linen!" And she hurried from the room.

CHAPTER IV

INSTEAD of composing himself for sleep as he had been advised, Mr. Welby sat musing. His pipe was out, and he did not trouble to light it. All kinds of thoughts were passing through his mind. Mrs. Welby had left the door ajar, and presently he heard voices outside in the hall. It was Amabel saying that it was time for her to go, and Jack asking her to wait a few minutes, until he could escort her.

"No," said Amabel, "I shall be quite all right. Don't leave the others. Please finish your game."

"Hang the game!" said Jack. "We're all bored stiff with it. Just wait, Mab. I'll tell them to chuck it."

Mr. Welby went to the dining room door. "Miss Price. Er—Amabel—a word." And Amabel came shyly into the room.

Mr. Welby looked hard at her, and spoke kindly but abruptly. "Quite in confidence. You won't mind my asking. Before you joined your present employer, what were you doing?"

"The same sort of work," said Amabel, "but with somebody else."

"And before that you were in a bonnet shop, weren't you?"

"Yes."

"A ladies' bonnet shop?"

"Yes."

"Kept by ladies for ladies?"

"Yes."

"Why didn't you stay there?"

"Because," said Amabel, embarrassed, but endeavouring to smile, "well—because the shop failed."

"Didn't the bonnets pay?"

"Yes. But the customers didn't."

"That wasn't very ladylike of them."

"No, it was rather inconsiderate."

"And this Mr. What's-his-name? You aren't really comfortable with him?"

Amabel shook her head negatively.

"How long do you propose to stick it?"

"Until I can find anything better."

"How old is he?"

"About thirty-five, I should think."

"Married man?"

"No. Single."

"Humph!" And Mr. Welby continued sympathetically, but with a certain coarseness of which he was not himself aware. "Has it occurred to you—I don't say it for myself, but people might easily say it—that you're in rather a false position?" He looked even harder at her, but she did not answer. "I am sure your own delicacy of feeling suggests objections to it."

"Mr. Welby," said Amabel, greatly distressed, "I can't afford to be too delicate. I have to earn my living first."

"Just so. But perhaps otherwise—— At my age, of course, I know a good deal better than you can that when men have authority over attractive young women, they don't always behave themselves. Now tell me candidly— Is the man *nice* to you?"

Amabel had plainly shown how much she disliked the

conversation, and she now endeavoured to end it. "I see what you mean. No. I have nothing of that sort to complain of. If I must be quite truthful—yes, I did feel uncomfortable, because I thought there was—well, the annoyance—or the danger—you are thinking of. But that's over and done with. It's all the other way now. He is more inclined to bully me than to make love to me."

"That may be only his *artfulness*. He may be beginning a new game like that."

Amabel was almost in tears. "Oh, Mr. Welby," she said piteously, "don't make me discontented with my life. It's hard enough, anyhow."

"My dear," said Mr. Welby kindly, "I only meant——"

But while they talked, Jack had withdrawn himself from the game, and through the open door he had overheard their last few words.

"Father," he said decisively, "you have touched a sore spot, and I'm glad you have done so. For she knows it is my wish that she should chuck it."

"Steady, steady," said his father. "*Your* wish, indeed! What's it got to do with you?"

"Everything," said Jack.

"Not so fast. Not so fast. No, this won't do. You and I must have a talk, my lad, before this goes any further."

Amabel spoke with inoffensive dignity. "If you're going to talk about me, do you mind waiting until I have gone? Good-night, Mr. Welby. Please thank Mrs. Welby for me. . . . No, Jack, don't come with me."

"I'll come as far as the trams."

And as they went out, Mr. Welby heard her saying: "It isn't in the least necessary. I am quite able to take care of myself. You had much better let me go alone."

Mr. Welby sat down again, looking at the open door and thinking. From the garden the sound of his daughters' voices came faintly, with an occasional murmur from Mr. Carillon. Then a noisier music burst forth, as a piano organ at a little distance up the road began to roll out a medley of popular tunes. Then, after a little while, the girls and Mr. Carillon came into the hall, and Mr. Welby listened to what they were saying.

Carillon spoke tenderly of being compelled to tear himself away. He had directions to give at the vicarage before he went on to the Boys' Brigade. Violet suggested that she and her sister should walk with him as far as the church. "You'll come, Primrose, won't you?"

"No, I won't," said Primrose. "Two are company and three are none."

"Don't be silly," said Violet. "You know you are wanted. Do please come."

"No." And Primrose's voice sounded queerly and harshly. "Vi, don't you see I'm not up to it?"

"Poor old dear," said Violet, in a feeling tone. "Poor Primrose—I understand." And she said something more, but her voice was suddenly drowned by loud melody. The piano organ had now moved close to the house, and it was banging out an opening to a popular waltz.

"Ah," said Mr. Carillon, as the strains grew milder,

"the *Chocolate Soldier* waltz." And Primrose made an exclamation that was like a cry.

"Poor darling," said Violet. "I can read your thoughts. Poor, poor old Prim! That is what you would have been hearing now."

"Yes," gasped Primrose, "it would be just beginning," and she burst into a violent sobbing fit, and came into the dining-room.

"Bless me!" said Mr. Welby, jumping up. "What's the matter with you? Don't go on like this. Violet! Here! What's the matter with her?"

Violet explained with sympathetic gravity. "It's a ball at Kensington Town Hall that she might have gone to."

"Why the devil did you remind her of it?"

"Yes," said Violet, "it was stupid of me. But she heard that organ playing the waltz—it is still playing it."

"Send the damn thing away," said Mr. Welby angrily. And he went out to the front-door steps and shouted in wrath.

The organ stopped playing, and Mr. Welby stood there brandishing his arms and pointing down the road till its conductor had removed it to a safe distance. When he returned to the hall, still fuming, Violet was following her sister up the stairs, and she spoke over her shoulder solicitously to Mr. Carillon. "I must see to poor Primrose. She'll cry herself to sleep. I shan't wait for that. I'll be down directly. Don't go without me."

"Excuse my big D," said Mr. Welby apologetically to his guest. "It completely upset me," and he continued indignantly: "What right have they to come

under one's windows annoying one? Seem to think the street belongs to them. I shall ask for police protection if I have much more of it. But now—come in—sit down. What were we talking about?"

"Mr. Welby," said the young man, "I am poor in words to thank you for your hospitality."

"Don't mention it."

"You don't know what a bright spot this house forms in my life. It is not only what every one must feel, that peace and calm reign in it, it is— Will you allow me to shut the door?"

"By all means."

"Yes," said Mr. Carillon, after shutting the door, "what I wish to speak of is strictly confidential. I was saying, it is not merely the tranquil atmosphere—I, ah, confess there is another, a greater charm that draws me here."

Mr. Welby merely looked at him thoughtfully.

"Sir, I think you can guess—I think I may now with propriety ask permission to continue my visits as—as a suitor for the hand of your elder daughter—Miss Violet."

"Carillon, I can't pretend that this takes me altogether by surprise."

"No. Indeed, I am glad of that. My feelings are of so strong a nature that I could not have concealed them—and it would have been very wrong of me to attempt to do so, in view of the frankness and cordiality with which I have been received by you. But, Mr. Welby, you will of course now expect me to make some statement as to my position—I mean, my financial position."

"Well, yes, that may be as well."

"But it is just this very point that I approach with the greatest misgivings. My private means are a negligible quantity. Preferment will undoubtedly come to me, in due course. Without vanity I can say there really is no doubt, Mr. Welby, that my circumstances must eventually improve, until they are very far more satisfactory than they are at present."

"Oh, well—"

"Yes, indeed. But if you consent—as I hope you will—it may be a long engagement—and in this I think of her rather than selfishly of myself—it may be a time of weary waiting, unless—well, unless—" And Mr. Carillon made a vague gesture with his hands.

"Unless what?"

"Unless you can make some small provision for your daughter."

"No, I can't." Mr. Welby had risen from his arm-chair, and he spoke loudly. "My position is this. I've worked all my life; I myself had to wait until I'd earned sufficient to support Mrs. Welby; I've brought up my children, given them a liberal education; and I say, damn it all—"

"Oh, please."

"I apologize. But I say, I have done all I could, and I can't do more."

"That," said Carillon sadly, "makes our future very doubtful. But you do not forbid my visits? This house is truly a bright spot in my life. If I may feel that Violet and I are regularly affianced it will, I feel sure, give me more confidence in myself. It will stimulate me to new hope, fresh courage."

He was speaking now in a manly, earnest style, and the faint suggestion of the pulpit voice which even

natural emotion could not altogether obliterate would not have rendered him ludicrous to any but an unfeeling critic. He might have said a good deal more, but he was stopped by the reappearance of Violet.

"I am ready," said Violet. "Oh, have I interrupted you?" And she looked anxiously from one to the other.

"No, it doesn't matter," said her father glumly. "We have finished. Good-night, Carillon."

They went out together, and Mr. Welby, standing by the window, watched them walk down the road. They moved slowly, disconsolately, and did not speak to Jack when they met him sauntering back towards the house.

"Well, father?" said Jack, as he came into the dining-room.

"Ha! So there you are."

"Yes, here I am."

Mr. Welby had begun irritably, if not angrily, but something in his son's tone checked him. He sat down, and when he spoke again it was with his customary kindness.

"My boy, I am sorry. I am sorry, of course, but all this with Miss Price doesn't seem to me very hopeful."

"No, it doesn't," said Jack bitterly. "Not a gleam of hope in it, unless Number 612854 wins the sweep—or a fairy comes down the chimney."

"What! You are all harping on the same string. You, too, want money to drop out of the sky. Jack, it's a grievous mistake. One must wait and earn it."

"How can I help wanting money? Not for myself, but for others!"

"Ah, you all say that."

"Listen, father," and Jack went on, with a strength

of emotion that he struggled almost fiercely to repress. Amabel is sweet and refined— isn't she?—elegant, a lady to her finger tips. I love her. But the woman I love is at the beck and call of another man for thirty shillings a week; and I can't say to her, 'Here, here's your thirty shillings—your beggarly thirty shillings—and henceforth look to me only.' The mater, too—the poor old mater. Think of *her*. The household drudge—sixty years of age, and toiling like a lodging-house slavey."

"Oh, bosh!"

"What is she doing now—after the long day? Upstairs, in that fusty room, ironing towels and sheets! *My* mother!" And Jack, ceasing to struggle, completely let himself go. "I said I only wanted money for others. That is a lie. I want it for myself. You say, Wait; but do you understand what that means? Mab and I love each other; we are young. We are longing for each other. But no, we are to wait—to wait—to wait. We are to master our senses. That is, I am. Mab's an angel. I am to put ice on my head, or bathe in the Serpentine—cool the hot blood—stifle every call of nature, every instinct of manhood—and wait. For five pounds a week certain the bells would ring. That ass Carillon would bless us, someone would throw the rice, and we should go hand in hand to our snug little home—husband and wife—happy. Happy! . . . But it is wrong to want money, wicked to envy rich people. I tell you, when I read in the paper of my Lord This or That, my Lord Poopstick, aged twenty-three, marrying his Lady Honey-suckle, aged twenty-two, I am bursting with envy. I think: What have I done that a curse should fall upon

me? Fate. It's what the books always said. I am half and half, mid-way up the scale, bound to wear a black coat. I have lost the freedom of the peasant, and not gained the power of the noble."

"Jack—my boy—my dear boy," said his father brokenly and huskily, "when you talk like this, you knock down all my house of cards."

"Heaven knows I don't blame *you*," said Jack. "I am quarrelling with Fate, only with Fate." He came close to Mr. Welby, clutched his hand, and squeezed it convulsively. "Whoever's fault it is, it isn't yours, dear old chap. You—you're just a brick." And he hurried from the room.

Mr. Welby sat thinking.

CHAPTER V

MRS. WELBY had come downstairs to heat her iron again; she opened the door cautiously, and peeped into the room to see if he was asleep.

"Have you had your forty winks?"

"No, I haven't."

"I won't disturb you. Primrose is lying down. A little hysterical—but she'll do all right now. Oh! Something I'm forgetting!" She came into the room; and, kneeling by the sideboard, brought out a whisky bottle and a glass. These she placed with a carafe on the corner of the sideboard. "Now he'll find them where he always looks for them. I do wish you could have your nap."

"I've been thinking," said Mr. Welby, "turning things over in my mind," and he spoke hesitatingly. "Look here. An idea. It has occurred to me—Couldn't you use your influence and get something out of him? Not for us, of course, but for them. Put it to him that he really ought to for the girls' sake. A dress allowance! Fifty pounds apiece?"

"Oh, I couldn't ask him."

"Why not?" said Mr. Welby eagerly.

"I simply *couldn't*."

"I don't see what prevents you."

"My feelings prevent me."

"What feelings?"

"Pride."

"But I think that's false pride," said Mr. Welby, with increased eagerness. "I can't see any harm in accepting what he'd never miss. I've thought too, in these last five minutes, of what you said when you put your foot down about treating him with consideration and respect. Maybe, I've gone on the wrong tack with him. Too independent and offhand. You try him on another line—drop a few hints—sound him—what?"

"No," said Mrs. Welby, shaking her head. "Oh, no." And she added reproachfully: "It isn't like you to suggest it."

"I suppose it isn't." And Mr. Welby stretched his arms. "But I've been a bit upset—in my thoughts."

"Why can't you take your nap?"

"I'll try," and he settled himself down in the arm-chair and shut his eyes. Mrs. Welby stood looking at him, and when he spoke again his tone was already drowsy. "Have you finished upstairs?"

"No, scarcely begun. But I'll have finished by bedtime."

"Don't work so hard," he said sleepily. "I hate to see you working."

"But I must," she said in a low, gentle tone, and she went out softly, talking to herself rather than to him. "I must keep at it now. Such a state as I've got that room into. It'll take poor Sarah a week to put it straight."

Mr. Welby slept.

The kitchen fire was low and the iron heated slowly; then, when Mrs. Welby judged that it was sufficiently hot, she found herself unable to pick it up for want of the little pad with which to grasp its handle. She

must have left this necessary adjunct on the sideboard. She went softly back to the dining-room.

The daylight had begun to fade fast now; outside in the roadway lamps were being lit; in the quiet house the shadows deepened. As she stood at the dining-room door, turning the door handle with the utmost precaution, so as not to awake her husband, she was surprised by hearing his voice. He was not asleep then: he had somebody in there talking with him. She opened the door without any further care, and went in.

But there was nobody there except her husband. For a moment Mrs. Welby had a queer uncanny sort of feeling, as she stood there in the dusky room, finding it empty, and seeing Mr. Welby sound asleep in his arm-chair. How very odd! He must have been talking to himself in his sleep.

She stood by the chair observing him. There was nothing visible or audible to disturb his repose; and yet quite obviously this slumber, although deep, was far from being tranquil or refreshing. He made restless little movements, he muttered and groaned faintly. He was dreaming. She watched him anxiously and nervously, noticing how his hands, one on each knee, seemed to have a tremor or flutter, as though in the throes of the dream he was vainly trying to raise them. But if so—if the dream was of a distressful nature—she had better rouse him from it; and she was on the point of waking him, when suddenly he began to talk aloud again.

"Yes, yes, yes," he said rapidly, "I wish for it."

Mrs. Welby drew back, really for a moment frightened. The sound of his voice, as it suddenly broke the silence of the darkening room, had an effect so strange

as almost to take one's breath away. As always, when people talk in their sleep, the voice sounded toneless and expressionless. If she had not had him beneath her eyes and seen his lips moving, she would not have recognized it as her husband's voice at all. Yet it was loud and distinct, with every word fully articulated.

"Yes," he said, "give me money. Yes, money. Yes, that's my wish." And then he himself threw off the burden of the dream, and staggered to his feet. He rubbed his eyes, and stood staring at her in a dazed, confused manner.

"My dear," said Mrs. Welby, "what is it? Don't you feel well? You were quite frightening me."

"Let me have something to drink. I'm parched. The whisky. Let me have some whisky."

She went to the sideboard, poured out some whisky and water, and brought the glass back to him.

"You were dreaming?"

"Yes," he said, after he had drunk. "Such a dream!" And he tried to laugh. "Your talk! Hanged if I didn't dream of a fairy coming to me!"

Mrs. Welby laughed reassuringly. "Good fairies won't come our way."

"No, nor bad ones neither. But I feel to-night, if the devil himself rang the bell, I'd make him welcome."

"Don't say that, even in joke."

"I say it in earnest."

He had finished his drink, and he stood looking at her, with the glass in his hand. She was looking at him anxiously. Then something made her turn round, and, startled, she uttered an exclamation. Mr. Welby turning started also, and let the glass fall with a tink-

ling crash upon the floor. Their cousin, old Nicholas, was standing on the threshold of the room.

"By Jove! you made me jump," said Mr. Welby.

"The front door was open," said Nicholas, "so I came in without ringing."

CHAPTER VI

HE was a tall, thin, elderly man, of sallow complexion and invalidish aspect. After the exchange of a few stereotyped civilities while they were welcoming him, he went to his customary place by the sideboard, and sat there looking at them gloomily. His voice, when he spoke, was toneless and weary.

"Where's everybody?"

"They're somewhere about," said Mrs. Welby. "They'll be here directly—except Primrose, who has gone to bed with a headache."

"Headache! Her head oughtn't to ache at her age."

"No, but it's nothing," and Mrs. Welby busied herself at the sideboard. "You'll have some refreshments," and she poured out whisky.

"Don't give me soda water. Plain water."

"I know," said Mrs. Welby.

"Soda water—" and he made a gesture with his hand, seeming to indicate that anything effervescent had a disastrous effect upon his inside. "Soda water doesn't agree with me."

"Then you're wise to avoid it," said Mr. Welby.

"Thank you." And Nicholas, turning and stretching out his hand to take the glass from the sideboard, saw the Pompeiian vase conspicuously displayed there. He picked up the vase instead of the glass, and looked at it with a slow smile.

"Ah," said Mrs. Welby, with a sprightly assumption of friendliness and pleasure. "You remember that?"

"I've a long memory. I never forget anything," and he put the vase back in its place.

"You see how she has treasured it."

He sat silent, looking at them, and slowly sipping his whisky and water.

"Do you know," continued Mrs. Welby, smilingly, "that it's simply *ages* since you've honoured us with a visit. We'd all been wondering and talking about you—hadn't we, dear? When the telegram came, your godchild, Primrose, sprang up, and— Well, I'll tell you exactly what she said."

"Could you postpone telling me? The fact is, I wanted to speak to Welby alone. Don't think me rude."

"Why, of *course* not," said Mrs. Welby, slightly taken aback, but smiling, and she went towards the door.

"I'm not inconveniencing you?"

"On the contrary. I left a bit of fancy work upstairs that I shall be glad to get on with while you and he have your chat," and she left the room.

There was a long silence before Nicholas spoke.

"Welby, I'm in trouble."

"What say?"

"I have come to ask for your help."

Mr. Welby was completely taken aback. "You in trouble—and you ask me to help you?"

"You don't give me a cordial answer."

"I'm so staggered. It's such a topsy-turvy idea. You call upon me to— Why, it seems to me the world's gone upside down."

Nicholas sighed, coughed, and held up his hand.

But Mr. Welby went on, almost with heat: "Here you, an old bachelor, rolling in it, and you expect me, a struggling family man, to— Well, you've been here before. You see what I am. You know what I am."

"Yes, I know what you are—the wisest and the kindest man I ever met."

"Maybe. Thank you. Much obliged. But all the same! I'm a man with strong shoulders, but I'm carrying a bit over what I *can* carry, do all I try."

"Don't fail me, Welby," said Nicholas mournfully.

"You best tell me straight out what it is. Things gone wrong with the company?"

"No," said Nicholas, "things gone wrong with me," and he made another vague gesture, seeming to imply internal distress. "Complications."

Mr. Welby was so enormously relieved that he did not attempt for the moment to conceal his pleasure. "Oh," he cried cheerfully, "you only mean your health?"

Cousin Nicholas nodded.

"But I'm not a doctor. How can I help you?"

"I'll tell you. You see in me a lonely man, a tired man, a *doomed* man. I've been up before all the specialists, and to-day I got my death sentence. Probably I have only a few months to live, and I'm afraid of dying among strangers. I want to stay here as a permanent visitor with you and your children. Make much of me—make it easy for me till the end, and I promise you shall find yourself amply rewarded after I'm gone. I'll leave you my money."

Mr. Welby was husky from excitement. "You take my breath away. Your generous intentions absolutely—"

"Yes, I'll do that, whether you say yes or no. I have decided on it."

"You overwhelm me."

"I have observed you all on my visits, and I have admired you all." Saying this, Nicholas glanced round the shabby room. "The happy and contented family life—the courage—the endurance—the light-heartedness. You have not everything; but you are contented with what you have. All my life I have been striving to amass money. What for? Useless. I wish I'd taken a lesson from you. Now will you admit me into the charmed circle—for a little while?"

"Will we?" cried Welby, with enthusiasm. "How can you doubt?" And he offered his hand.

Nicholas rose, and they were clasping hands when Jack came into the room.

"Jack," shouted Welby boisterously. "Call your mother. Call Violet. Wake up Primrose." Then he led Nicholas across from the sideboard to the arm-chair. "I don't say welcome. You're *at home*. Sit in the easy chair—my own chair."

"I shan't use it long."

"Bosh! Don't you think that. *You'll* be all right. *We'll* cheer you up, and soon make you forget all the pessimistic nonsense those doctors have been telling you."

Then Mrs. Welby came in with the others. Sarah, returned from her outing, but still in hat and scarf, stood in the doorway behind them.

"My dear," said Mr. Welby, "he has come to stay with us for good and all. Your cousin takes a gloomy view of his health—without the least reason, as I am sure. No, Nicholas, don't you believe what the doctors

say. But, Violet—Jack—it's for us to cheer him, and to drive away all such fancies. Sarah, is the spare room ready?"

"The spare room!" Sarah echoed the words blankly.

Mrs. Welby, also confused and perturbed, answered for her. "The room is not quite ready, but it will be in two minutes."

"My luggage," said the visitor, "is at the Underground Station."

CHAPTER VII

THEY had been happy because they were contented—or rather because they thought they were contented, and that is very nearly the same thing. Now they were restless, anxious, horribly discontented, and they knew it. Nothing could satisfy them at each passing moment, because their minds were all busily engaged in seeking the greater satisfaction with which remote moments should be filled.

Yet they had still to seem what they used to be. Since it was by their simple unreasoning contentment that they had won the heart of their rich relative, they must continue to act this quality even if the quality itself had gone for ever.

At dinner Mr. Welby used to say just the sort of things that he had been saying for years; but now his jovial tone had a hollow ring, and often his proverbs and little scraps of cheerful philosophy cost him a prodigious effort. Knowing that the visitor liked their gaiety and light-heartedness, they stimulated Jack to keep up a running fire of pleasantry throughout the meal.

"Tell Cousin Nicholas that amusing yarn you told me in the tram," said Mr. Welby.

"Oh, what was that?" said the girls, giggling prematurely.

"Yes, do let's have it, Jack," said his mother, tittering.

But the unfortunate Jack was worn out; he had exhausted his natural flow of mirth and was reduced to the very lowest ebb. In despair, forcing the note like a second-rate public entertainer, he narrated some miserable anecdote about an Englishman, a Scotchman, and an Irishman in a railway accident.

And perhaps only the family laughed, while the honoured guest looked at them forlornly.

"It is not quite new," he said, with his toneless voice. "I have heard it before—quite a long time ago."

"I dare say you have," said Jack irritably.

"Personally, I never mind an old joke," said Mrs. Welby, tittering nervously, "if it's well told. The oftener I hear it, the more heartily I laugh at it." And she was going to add that laughter was good for the digestion, when she remembered it was a word to be avoided carefully.

It was a failure of the digestive apparatus that was sweeping Nicholas onward to his doom; for, now that he was comfortably established in their midst, always under their watchful eyes, they could not doubt that he had been fatally correct when describing himself as doomed. By daylight his complexion looked like the parchment of old title deeds; sometimes his eyes had scarcely a gleam of light in them; he was so thin and frail that, as the doctor said, a puff of wind would blow him away. The doctor, who paid him a visit every morning, said explicitly that he could not last long.

They felt then that, however fretful, difficult, and troublesome he might be, they must never lose patience or fail in affectionate attention. His money was coming to them. The money was all right.

The will was all right. After a month or six weeks he had given them an awful scare by confessing that he had not yet executed his will. But then Mr. Welby tackled him, acting bluntness and independence, with a frank and jovial face, but inwardly tortured.

"Look here, Nicholas. What you have let fall, so often, about our expectations makes it difficult to say what I'm going to say." And he went on in fine manly style, declaring that this feeling should not prevent him from doing his duty. "After all, I'm not afraid that you'll mistake us for what we are not. We aren't the sort of people to wait for—" He was going to say "dead men's shoes," but he stopped himself. "You know very well I don't believe one little word of all those doctors. But I think you ought to make a will. It's a duty—in your position."

The old man looked at him, "through and through," as it seemed to Mr. Welby, and then he spoke in his usual dull way, without a trace of any emotion.

"Welby, you're a good fellow; a heart of gold. Yes, I'll do what you say."

And he sent for Mr. Rolls, his solicitor.

On the morning that he came Mr. Welby remained at home to receive him; the room of old Nicholas upstairs had been furnished with writing materials; the jobbing gardener sat in the kitchen with Sarah, drank beer, and waited, pleasantly idle, until the two witnesses were required.

Mr. Rolls, a stout urbane man, with a black ribbon to his eye-glasses, came downstairs again, and Mr. and Mrs. Welby almost pulled him into the drawing-room, to ascertain that everything had been accomplished.

They would have liked to look at the document itself,

but Mr. Rolls was professionally reticent, although they could see by his manner that he now considered them immensely valuable future clients. He let them understand quite plainly by his nods and smiles that the inheritance was theirs.

"But these matters are naturally kept private from everybody."

"What—from his nearest and dearest?"

"Yes, Mr. Welby—even from his nearest and dearest," and Mr. Rolls shook hands with both of them. "We shall meet again."

Naturally old Nicholas was paying for his bed and board in a handsome manner; moreover, he gave them little grants in aid, or sums on account of the future. His presents to the young people took the form of an occasional cheque which he offered with a sly secret kind of smile; and for these and all other benefits the family thanked him in a careless good-humoured way, as though, never having asked for largesse, they could not pretend to feel any oppressive sense of gratitude. They all remembered that, more than anything else, it was their independence of spirit which had won his heart.

Jack was particularly off-hand with him, saying: "I'm sure I don't know why you should let me bite your ear like this. Especially as I touched you for a tenner only last Wednesday, didn't I? Anyhow, it's very decent of you, and I'm much obliged—for this little bit of ready will pull me out of a scrape that I've got into."

"Oh, scrapes, scrapes!" said Nicholas, sighing. "At your age I used to get into them too. The thing to

remember is, that while one's alone in the scrape it doesn't matter. I do hope you'll never get anybody else into a scrape with you."

Jack glanced at him uneasily, and wondered what the deuce he meant by that. But of course he meant nothing. He was looking out of the window, gaping at the empty roadway. He never did mean anything, of course, although again and again he made queer remarks that either irritated you or set you wondering. All in turn noticed this unconscious trick of his—the little inadvertent sting that he gave one at the very moment when he was most amiable and flattering.

Thus he stung Violet while praising her sweetheart, Mr. Carillon.

"What a fine fellow," he said, smiling meditatively. "So strong and self-reliant. More like a soldier than a curate. I told him so. If you put him in the Guards, how well he would look—in that smart uniform!"

Violet winced. She did not like it; somehow these compliments made her acutely uncomfortable. He went on talking about herself.

"Am I indiscreet in showing that your mother has let me into your romantic secret? I was surprised when she told me."

"Why were you surprised, Cousin Nicholas?"

"I suppose because nobility of mind always surprises one just at first—even when one ought to be prepared for it," and he sat there smiling at her admiringly. "A beautiful handsome girl like you might so easily have thought that she could do better in a worldly sense. But you could not, my dear Violet, from the spiritual

point of view. It is a grand life, really—though made fun of in plays and comic papers. The curate's wife! Yes, if thoughtless people sneer, they don't understand that she has neither means nor leisure for adornment, cultivation, or airs and graces. She lives for others, not for herself."

And Violet felt that he was rubbing all this in most fearfully.

"You are admirably suited to it, Violet. Outward show is nothing to you; you have always neglected yourself; you are careless about your dress."

"Do you mean I am dowdy?" said Violet, with a hot and angry glow in her cheeks.

But Cousin Nicholas said he had meant nothing so disrespectful; far from it. He was only praising her.

In much the same manner he upset Primrose. Between the sisters a certain sharpness of rivalry had arisen. Primrose suspected Violet of not playing cricket, of getting at their cousin on the sly; and in self-defence she too resorted to ruses, feeling ashamed of herself at first, and then soon losing any sense of compunction. Indeed, throughout the house the same influence was at work, and it had the same deteriorating effect on one and all.

One Saturday, when Mr. Welby was going to take the invalid for a drive and had gone to fetch the T-cart, Nicholas being alone with Primrose gave her a cheque, which he said was to be considered quite secret and confidential.

"Remember," he said, "you *are* my god-daughter"; and by reminding her of a fact which he himself seemed to have forgotten during so many years, he enabled her

to satisfy scruples of conscience if any still lingered.

"Yes, that's true," said Primrose. "All right, then. Many thanks." And she hid the cheque, and gave him a kiss on his bald wrinkled forehead.

"What a pretty payment," he said, with a gratified smile.

"It's a very easy way," said Primrose gaily, "and a very cheap way of paying debts—with a kiss."

"Ah, my dear, they are cheap now. But there may come a day eventually, when some one of my sex may attach quite a value to your kisses."

"Does that seem to you so very unlikely?" asked Primrose, stung by his queer words.

The old fellow smiled at her benignly. "No, dear. Not if he is sensible, and can look below the surface as I do. Beauty is only skin-deep, Primrose. I have always thought that if a girl is not repulsive in any way, it is sufficient."

Primrose bit her lip. For a moment she felt inclined to tear up the cheque and throw the fragments of it in his stupid yellow face. But that, of course, would have been foolish on her part, since his tactlessness was obviously unpremeditated. She could not, however, refrain from speaking recklessly and defiantly.

"It may astonish you, but I have had several admirers in my time—and, if you want to know, I'm going out to meet one of them now."

"Well, well," murmured the old gentleman. "As your dear father says, wonders will never cease."

"His name is Perkins," said Primrose shrilly.

"Perkins! A grand old English name," and he turned in the arm-chair and looked out at the road.

"Perkins, Beaufort, Mowbray—there's a prestige, a resonance, about the names of aristocratic families that have been seated in the same place and—— Ah, here comes the carriage. I know your father dislikes driving as an amusement; yet he sacrifices himself for me. But you are all the same—you never think of yourselves, you think only of others."

This afternoon, while Mr. Welby was conducting the T-cart jaunt, Violet spent an hour with Mr. Carillon, and Jack and Amabel Price had an uncomfortable tea together in Battersea Park.

Jack had kept Amabel waiting for him a long time, and she was silent, perhaps thinking of this neglect as bitterly as her sweet nature would allow.

"Buck up, old girl," said Jack, after paying the bill. "Come on. I've something for you in my pocket—a little bit of sugar for the bird."

They walked away from the other people, and along the path by the river. The surface of the broad stream was ruffled by a cold breeze; the seagulls were flying low and emitting melancholy notes; the buildings on the further shore looked dull and severe as prisons against the darkening sky; and in the park itself autumn had already brought an aspect of ruin and desolation, for after a hot dry summer all the foliage had shrunk and died quickly. Amabel shivered, and gave her thin scarf another turn round her graceful neck.

Then, standing with her by the railed wall above the water, Jack produced his little glittering piece of consolation. It was a pretty but inexpensive ring, and after pulling off her well-worn glove he put it on one of her long, slender fingers.

"My engagement ring," she said in a low voice as she looked at it.

"Your wedding ring—if it makes you more comfortable to think it so."

"Jack, don't—please don't say things like that."

He was holding her by the arm now, with his face near hers, watching the quiver of her lips and the delicate colour as it glowed and faded on her pale cheek. "See. I'll put the ring on your finger again," and he did so. "'With this ring I thee wed.' There are the sacred words, to make my pretty frightened little girl feel that it's all right. 'For better for worse, in sickness and——'"

"No, don't say them. It isn't lucky, Jack."

Jack laughed. Then he went on to say that the financial assistance given to him from time to time by his cousin Nicholas would enable him to make her an allowance; and he wished her to give up working, and move into some lodgings where the landlady would not create a silly fuss when he came to see her.

Amabel walked fast when he said these and other things, and when she spoke to him it was in a tone of misery.

"Jack, don't make me think that you are purposely trying to insult me. That would be too cruel—from you."

"What nonsense?" Jack laughed at her expostulations, still urging her to take money from him. "And, of course, when the old man does finally turn up his toes——"

Amabel, interrupting, told him for the first time of the vague fears aroused in her by the presence of the visitor at their house. She said that to her mind there

was something sinister, something quite dreadful, in the idea of this moribund old man sitting there, while they all watched him and thought of what would happen at his death. He himself was so strange, so terrible, in his apparent unconcern with regard to the impending fate. He knew that he was dying, and he did not mind. She was afraid of him.

"Afraid! Why? He hasn't been rude to you, has he?"

"Oh, no! He scarcely ever says a word to me. But he *looks* at me, Jack, and he *smiles* at me—as if he had read all my secret thoughts, and was slyly *pitying* me. It makes me so uncomfortable that I can hardly sit still at the table."

"Well, that's odd," said Jack. "I must say that's devilish odd."

"Jack, I feel certain that he is not to be trusted. Don't trust him."

"D'you mean that after all he may play us false—or that he really hasn't got the goods?" And as they walked on again Jack became moody and preoccupied.

"I wasn't thinking of his money," she said. "I meant, is he really and truly as fond of you all as he seems to be?"

Jack, not listening, was deep in thought. But he roused himself and spoke cheerfully. "Oh, no, Mab, my pretty one, he must be all right. Yes, I know he is."

And he described the office of the old gentleman's company. It was a dark dismal kind of place in one of the narrow courts off Lombard Street, with a rum-looking manager, half Austrian, half Jew, and a lot of clerks who jabbered German among themselves; but

everything there was thoroughly reassuring. Last time Jack visited it, sent there by Nicholas to fetch letters, Mr. Bernstein, the manager, told him what large profits the mine yielded year after year. He had given Jack a message—to tell the old gentleman not to worry, because everything was going splendidly.

Violet and Mr. Carillon had their tea in a downstairs room of the vicarage, with the bachelor vicar and his spinster sister; afterwards they went into the vestry of the church, into the parish hall, into the gymnasium of the boys' brigade, Carillon fulfilling in each place some of those small duties that seem unending in the busy day of a conscientious curate; and throughout the little tour Violet was cruelly haunted by memories of that conversation when old Nicholas held forth about the abnegation and self-sacrifice demanded of a curate's wife.

His tasks performed, honest Carillon took her back to the vicarage and upstairs to the living-room that he and the vicar and the other curate shared in common. They were alone there, and while Carillon talked to her lovingly, she studied the appearance of the room and thought again of all that Nicholas had said.

The stone-coloured walls were decorated here and there with Biblical prints in black frames; some dwarf bookcases overflowed with dull cloth-bound theological books; there were two large flat writing-tables; and the chairs, fashioned out of the wood that is generally used for pews and ornamented in the same ecclesiastical style, had not a cushion among the whole stiff straight six of them. There was no arm-chair, no sofa, no footstool. On the mantelshelf, as well as on the tables, one

saw piles of parish circulars, church notices, and so forth.

The room and its contents were so hideously uninteresting, so suggestive of everything dull, monotonous, and unromantic, that Violet instinctively turned her back on it and went to one of the windows. Leaning against the dusty red curtain, she looked out at the roadway, the passing trams, the leafless trees, and the arid Common.

It was here by the window, with her hand in his, that her sweetheart spoke of Nicholas, saying how very curious had been his suggestion about the army.

"I think," he said, "it showed a remarkable insight into character; for—though you mightn't guess it, Violet—that *was* my early ambition," and, squeezing her hand, he laughed complacently. "Can you fancy me as a soldier, Vi?"

"No, I can't," said Violet abruptly.

"Don't you think I'd have made a good soldier if I'd tried?"

"No, I don't," said Violet, with irritation, and she snatched her hand away.

"Vi!"

"Oh, it's all right. Don't be silly. I didn't mean to hurt you."

Mr. Carillon had been really hurt by her tone and manner; but, like the good man he was, he accepted her excuses.

"I only meant it's ridiculous to talk like that, and it got on my nerves," said Violet, excusing herself. "Forgive me, but I'm nervous and overwrought—Oh!" And she uttered an exclamation. "What a queer coincidence!"

Following the direction of her eyes as she stared down at the broad road, Carillon saw Manger's T-cart and the well-known brown horse go jogging past. Mr. Welby was sitting bolt-upright, and driving with consummate skill, as he worked round a stationary tram. The old gentleman, sitting low beside him, was muffled in a big overcoat; his head hung forward on his feeble, skinny neck, and jolted strangely as the tram-lines wrenched at the wheels of the light carriage; he looked half dead already.

But Mr. Welby swung him along gaily, up the gentle slope, and round the corner into the quiet home-road.

From the corner of the road one could see the house, and hundreds of times Mr. Welby, returning from the City on summer afternoons, had stood here and admired it. To him it had been not *a* house, but *the* house. He had looked at it with a kind of mellow golden pleasure, a sensation seeming to belong to the warm slanted sunbeams that touched so lovingly its stucco cornice, its plate-glass windows, its impressive front-door steps. And the house used to say to him: "Yes, you may well look at me; you may well be proud of me."

Now its charm had gone. It was just like the houses on each side of it—a shabby little affair, set in the midst of shabbiness.

That was what the visitor had done for them so far. He had disenchanting them.

CHAPTER VIII

THE last days of November brought boisterous cold winds, the sort of winds that made the gas jets flare each time the front door was opened to the dark night, and once blew out the candle on Mr. Welby's writing-table.

The sick man came no more downstairs. He was too weak to support himself. He sat in the ingeniously contrived wheel-chair that the Welbys had obtained for him, and was pushed by one of them round and round his own room, and out on the first-floor landing. Here there was a small window, at the back of the house, from which you looked right over the garden. Since the beginning of his confinement to the upper floor this view from the window seemed to exercise a fascination over him; whenever the light was good he would make them wheel him to the window, and there he remained as long as they permitted.

Lest he should take cold during these excursions from his room, Mrs. Welby had bought two portable oil-stoves, and they were kept in full blast on the landing; she wrapped him round with shawls, too, and she or one of the others was always in charge of him.

Thus, on a day as bright as any December day can be, he sat all huddled in the chair and stared out of the window. Jack was in charge of him, with Mrs. Welby not far off, and Mr. Welby somewhere on the

ground floor. Both Jack and his father had stayed at home for the last few days.

"It's wonderful, Jack," said the old man, still staring at the view. "It's wonderful."

"Yes," said Jack, "red-hot, isn't it?"

Although he used a slang expression, he spoke in a low voice, and both sympathetically and respectfully, for there was something about Cousin Nicholas to-day that overawed one. He himself spoke in low tones, and every word seemed to cost him trouble; his breathing was rapid and shallow; his eyes had a vitreous lustre; his fleshless fingers moved feebly on the tartan rug that lay over his knees.

"Wonderful!" He repeated the word, and then remained silent.

Truly it was a wonderful view. Beyond the garden one looked downward over the close-packed terraces to the broad railway line, and beyond that it was like a sea of roofs. In the cold clearness of the wintry sunlight one could see for an immense distance, to the faint grey outline of the northern heights, westward beyond the towers and domes of Kensington, eastward to St. Paul's Cathedral, the Monument, the Tower Bridge; here and there far-off glass or slate flashed prismatically; and certain buildings, while one looked at them, grew hard and firm as metal, grew vague again, and faded altogether. Then other buildings, towers and spires unseen till then, began to sparkle as the sunlight touched them in their turn.

And all at once the old man began to talk, hurriedly, excitedly, in a way that was new and strange.

"There you have it, Jack. Would you accept if

you were tempted? There it is, at our feet—the kingdoms of the earth—the palaces—the inventions—the cunningly contrived secret places hidden behind the pillars of the high colonnade.”

“Cousin Nicholas,” said Jack, rather scared, “don’t tire yourself with talking,” and he looked round to see if his mother was anywhere near.

The old man went babbling on. “There you have it. Look at it—the glitter and the show—the toys men crave for, the pomp of the senate-house, the noise of the bazaar, the smiles of the painted slaves waiting behind the trellises—all that men stretch forth their hands to grasp, believing it is all out there—outside themselves instead of inside them. Yes, the dream of desire, the mirage of the desert, the mocking, mocking illusion. Ha! ha! ha! Man wants but little here below. Only an old, old man could have said that. But youth—when one was young—young men—they want more and more—they want it all. If one said, ‘Stretch out your arms, and seize it——’”

“Mother,” called Jack. “Come here.”

The old man was silent now, huddled lower in the chair, and Jack, stooping over him, touched his hand.

He slowly moved his head till presently he was looking up at Jack, and he spoke breathlessly, but in his ordinary manner.

“Jack, you must honour your father and your mother. Be gentle with them. And be kind to someone else. . . . Jack, do you hear me? Be kind to that girl.”

He said no more.

Mrs. Welby was bustling to them. “He ought to

get back to his room," she said briskly. "How has he been?"

"I—I—I think he's light-headed," Jack stammered in a whisper. "I—I think it is near the end with him."

And it was.

PART TWO

PROSPERITY



CHAPTER I

TO new-comers in the great world there is no more useful work of reference than the volume known as "Who's Who," and Mr. Welby consulted it often during this brilliant London season of the year 1914. He used to call for it loudly after meeting distinguished personages at public dinners or charity bazaars. "Where's 'Who's Who'?"

What he really said was "Where Zoo-Zoo?" But every one, including the butler, knew what he meant. From time immemorial Mr. Welby had occasionally failed to sound an aspirate. No one noticed or minded this at Clapham; but it was a little disconcerting at Knightsbridge, and his daughters sometimes thought that if only he had come into a few more h's together with his fortune, they might have been proud of him as well as fond of him. However, they had much to be thankful for, since he had shown remarkable adaptability under changed conditions, throwing himself heart and soul into all the enjoyment that fashion and frivolity can offer, being indulgent to the whims of the family—seldom putting his foot down.

Now, on a warm June evening, the Welbys were dining quietly at home in their splendid flat. Dinner was over, and the girls had just romped off with the two male guests, through the morning-room into the drawing-room, leaving all the doors open behind them. Mr. and Mrs. Welby remained seated at table to drink their coffee. Timesman, assisted by a tall footman,

having filled their cups, carried the trays after the noisy party and meekly awaited their attention.

In there all was laughter, gaiety and noise. Violet and Mr. Adolphus Faring had immediately started the huge gramophone with one of George Robey's screaming records; Primrose had snatched up her violin and begun to play a Tarantula dance; while Sir John Lightwood cut elderly capers round her in an ecstasy of admiration at what he termed her *verve* and *abandon*. The butler and the footman moved here and there discreetly, careful not to get the trays knocked over.

From her seat at the table Mrs. Welby had a delightful vista of the rooms, the inner one ablaze with electric light, and through its open doors offering what seemed a typical picture of high life—the two fascinating young women with bare white shoulders and bright coloured gauze frocks; the two fashionable men in faultless evening dress; the liveried servant and the one in plain clothes. She sat watching and tittering.

"Close those doors, Timesman," said Mr. Welby, as the servants returned. "And get me some old brandy."

The footman closed the doors and vanished, while Timesman went to the vast oak buffet and sought among a glitter of gold and silver for the cut-glass decanter that was required.

Mr. Welby leaned back in his chair and blew a puff of cigar smoke towards the carved and painted ceiling.

It was a really gorgeous flat—at least two flats having been thrown into one to make it what it was. Yet, but for a disappointment, he would have secured something even better. This was on the fourth floor, and he had been in treaty for some unique accommodation on the first floor when a man richer than himself came

and snapped it up. The affair had left a slight bitterness in the mind of Mr. Welby, and he felt that the landlords had treated him badly. While he was hesitating about the price, they had no right to go and let the place over his head—or rather, under his feet. However, that was already ancient history, not worth thinking of any longer.

“Well,” he said, stretching himself comfortably, “it’s pleasant to get a night off. I’m dead tired. I shall be glad to turn in early.”

“My dear,” said Mrs. Welby, “have you forgotten the Quartz’s musical party in Prince’s Gate?”

“O Lord, must we go to that?”

“Yes, we really must,” said Mrs. Welby, tittering; and she added with meaning: “In the circumstances, you know. Yes, *all* of us. It’s only to change your coat. You’re perfect otherwise.”

And this was true. In his white waistcoat and white tie, with all the jewelled buttons and pearl studs, Mr. Welby sitting down looked grand enough for any party, and directly he had put on his swallow-tails in place of his dinner jacket he would be fit to stand up.

But he did certainly look tired. His face, much redder than it used to be, was puffy, and yet it showed many more lines than were on it in the old days. Especially about the mouth there were wrinkles that swiftly deepened under the stress of each little passing annoyance; and then the expression of his face was one of almost childish querulousness. Mrs. Welby had aged also, but she was so grandly dressed, with such iridescent satin, such gossamer lace, and such flashing ornaments, that this was less perceptible than in the case of her husband. She tittered a great deal. This

tittering, to which she had always been inclined, worried her daughters. Other fashionable ladies eked out their small talk with much smiling and gentle laughter; but Mrs. Welby did it too much. It had become a nervous trick with her; it was just a symptom of tired nerves. Thus she went on tittering now merely because Timesman was in the room. She could not feel really herself except when she and her husband were quite alone.

"I think," said Timesman, "that I had better not take the liqueurs into the drawing-room, for fear of an accident. I'll place them here."

"No," said Mrs. Welby, "take them out into the hall, where the gentlemen can help themselves when they choose."

"Yes, my lady."

Mrs. Welby tittered.

"I beg pardon," said Timesman, apologizing for the slip that he had made. "I said 'My lady' unawares. . . . Yes, ma'am."

"Ah!" said Mr. Welby. "You've got it right this time."

"Yes, sir," said Timesman, with a grave smile; "but perhaps I was only premature. The other mode of address may be correct before long," and he carried the tray of liqueur bottles out of the room.

Mr. Welby laughed good-humouredly, astounded but tickled by the rascal's acuteness. This was Mr. Welby's deepest and strongest wish—the knighthood; already he had put down some solid money to further his secret desire; the thing might come to him next January. In strictest confidence he had mentioned the hope to Mrs. Welby, saying: "Of course, I don't want it for myself.

I'm only thinking of you and the others." And he added, with the lines deepening and the querulous expression coming upon his face: "If I was like that fellow downstairs and could afford to write a cheque for ten thousand pounds, I'd get it as sure as eggs are eggs."

"Sounds all right," he said now, chuckling. "My lady! What?" And he nodded towards the door through which Timesman had passed into the hall. "A knock-out, isn't he? Sharp as a razor."

Timesman returned and sedately performed some final rite at the buffet; Mr. Welby was silent; and Mrs. Welby tittered, and went on tittering till Timesman withdrew.

Whatever else occasionally discontented the Welbys, they were at any rate never otherwise than well satisfied with their butler. Slim but dignified, perhaps about thirty years of age, "knowing his job inside out," he was considered by his present employers as a real treasure. Although he had been in the very best places, he never threw his former eminence at your head; he never took a liberty, never failed in absolute respect. Mr. Welby often spoke of this virtue. "What I like about him—he is so respectful."

The respectful Timesman closed the last door, leaving Mr. and Mrs. Welby to their chat, and went out into the hall, where he sat sipping maraschino and reading the *Pall Mall Gazette* until disturbed by trouble in the lobby between the footman and an importunate visitor.

The hall was not the least charming apartment of the flat. Panelled with imitation old oak, fitted with brown leather arm-chairs and large carved tables, for

newspapers and magazines, it had a pleasant "homey" air, and was in fact generally used as a sitting-room; beyond it there was the square lobby, the front door, the landing, and the lift.

"Ssh! No raised voices, please," said Timesman, as he went to the lobby and confronted the middle-aged woman who had insisted upon coming in.

"It's all right," she declared. "He'll see me."

"Will he, indeed? Don't take things for granted."

"I'm an old friend," said Sarah, fumbling with her handbag. "Mr. Welby won't refuse to see *me*."

"That's not the point," said Timesman, very quiet and stern. "Is Mr. Welby expecting you?"

"Yes," said Sarah rather dolefully, "he's been expecting me ever since last quarter day. I don't want to disturb him, but he has had his dinner, of course?"

"He has had his dinner, but the processes of digestion have begun."

"Oh! Well, you take in my card when you get the opportunity. Now be obliging. Arrange an interview for me, without disturbing him or putting him out."

"It can't be done," said Timesman inexorably. Nevertheless, he accepted the card, and looking at it, seemed a little impressed: "'Miss Sarah Brown. Private Hotel!' The proprietor?"

"Yes. I bought the house from Mr. Welby—but part remains on mortgage—and, the fact is, I'm a little behind with the interest."

"Well, Miss Brown," said Timesman grandly, "I'd do anything I could for you——"

"That's right. I can wait, you know. I want to catch him in a real good temper."

"Ah, you may have to wait a long time for that." And Timesman, looking at the card, had one of his grave smiles. "Sounds better than Boarding House—'Private Hotel!'"

"I don't know," said Sarah, again rather dolefully. "It's been a bit too private, so far. The public haven't responded as I hoped."

"You are a long way out, of course. What made you choose such a locality?"

"I took the house over from him, when he gave up living there himself."

"What, did *he* live there?" said Timesman, much surprised.

"Yes, that was their home till last year, when the old gentleman died and they came into all the money."

"And you say you were a friend of the family?"

"I was in their service, as domestic, over twenty years."

"Step inside."

Timesman's manner had changed instantaneously, becoming very cordial and familiar. He led Sarah into the hall, made her sit in one of the leather arm-chairs, and, after dismissing the footman, went on talking with the utmost friendliness.

"Miss Brown, you're just the person I've been wanting to meet," and he smiled at her expansively. "I flattered myself I was something of a sociologist, but these Welbys have fairly baffled me. I simply can't *place* them. In a sense, of course, they're climbers—ordinary climbers."

Sarah looked puzzled.

"You know what I mean? They have arrived here," said Timesman, "but they want to get higher."

"But they're on the fourth floor. How many floors are there? That lift went on like a rocket."

Timesman laughed. "My dear Miss Brown, you are really refreshing. I alluded to social heights—the upper circles of society."

"Oh, I see. Yes, I suppose they keep very fine company nowadays?"

Timesman shrugged his shoulders and shook his head. "Mr. Jack and his friend, the Honourable Adolphus Faring, have done all they could for them. They go everywhere you can go by paying at the door. But Mr. Jack is accepted, gratis. Especially by the ladies, I gather," and he laughed again. "Oh, yea. Can't live without him, some of them—ring him up last thing at night and first thing in the morning. But the family—well, they're a harder proposition. They're too half-and-half."

"Half-and-half!" echoed Sarah, flushing indignantly.

"You know, vulgar without being funny. Smelling of money, but not smelling strong enough; just so-so; not this, or that. What *was* the old buster? Trade, of course?"

"He was a business gentleman."

"Yes, I saw that, first time he went through the books with me."

Sarah rose, bristling with indignation. "Don't you talk to me like this!" she cried. "Don't you ever talk like this!"

"Ssh! Ssh! There's the bell. Drawing-room, I expect. Come along with me," and he led her into the corridor. "I'll fix up your interview, and in exchange you must really prompt me with a hint or two. I mean

to give them a trial —anyhow, to the end of the season. Is it good enough to go on with?"

"I found it good enough for twenty years."

"Then there must be *something* to them. Did the old man drink in your time?"

"Certainly not."

"He does now. I don't say *soaking*, but more than's beneficial to him. There. Go in there. It's his library. I'll summon you as soon as I can manage it."

And Sarah was left to recover her composure alone in the library. This room too, although small, was imposing. Its walls were lined with white bookcases, above which a crimson paper stretched to the lofty cornice; on top of the bookcases stood marble busts of Socrates and three other famous philosophers; across one corner of the room a formidable writing-bureau occupied a lot of space and showed an untidy mass of papers. Sarah looked wonderingly at this inextricable litter of documents and stationery. She remembered the simplicity and methodic neatness of Mr. Welby's writing-table in the old days.

Meanwhile in the dining-room Mr. and Mrs. Welby had been talking confidentially. They were interrupted at first by the return of one of the guests.

"Forgive me," cried Sir John, bursting in. "But your fascinating daughter, that delicious Miss Primrose, has sent me to find her powder-box. Thinks she dropped it under the table," and he skipped round the chairs and went down upon his knees to search the floor.

"He-he-he-he!" said Mrs. Welby, tittering in gratification. "But really, Sir John, you shouldn't per-

mit her to send you about on errands in this way."

"Honour and privilege," cried Sir John, for the moment hidden from them by the table. "Greatest privilege and delight. Ah, here it is," and he got upon his rather shaky legs again.

He was a man of about fifty, with a few streaks of light-coloured hair plastered across his bald head. He had a supremely aristocratic and fashionable air, but somehow seemed worn-out, and very feeble physically, in spite of his sprightly, almost capering gait. His manner of speaking was assured, and yet finicking, and he spluttered when excited. The effort of groping on the floor and rising to the upright attitude brought the blood to his sallow face, making him for the moment seem apoplectic as well as rickety.

"I must fly back to her. Forgive me. She wants to powder her nose. Says it's red. A libel on the charming feature! Ha, Ha!"

As soon as he had shut the door Mr. Welby spoke very confidentially.

"My dear! *Who* is Sir John?"

"Oh!" said Mrs. Welby, with quiet satisfaction, "he is just Primrose's latest flame. The conquests that girl is having!"

"Did you ask him to dinner?"

"No," replied Mrs. Welby, in the same tone; "but I told Primrose to. Far better that they should meet under their father's roof. He has been pursuing her everywhere during the last week, and I don't want her to get talked about."

"Oh, I thought you did," said Mr. Welby simply.

"Only in a certain way. No one wishes to be *ignored*."

"Just so. But is this a case? Does he mean business?"

"It's for Prim to decide. But I fancy she's only playing with him. *He* is in deadly earnest, of course. He told me at dinner, in so many words, that she has made a slave of him."

Mr. Welby chuckled. "All the same," he said, "I'd wish to know a bit more about him. Always like to get my bearings. Where Zoo-Zoo?"

"In your study."

"Ah," and Mr. Welby gave a sigh of weariness. "I must go there and tackle my papers. I've the devil's own accumulation of letters to attend to."

"You'd be much wiser to have a nap, and freshen yourself for the Quartzs'. But about Sir John! He's a baronet—and an old baronet."

"Too old for Prim, to my thinking. What would you give him—fifty-five?"

Mrs. Welby explained that she was alluding to the date of the creation of the baronetcy, not to the age of the present holder of the title; and she told her husband how Sir John had further let fall in his talk to Primrose that he possessed an immense country place with wonderful gardens, a castle in Scotland, and a town house which he did not occupy. Then she spoke again of Primrose's successes and the gratification they caused her. She had counted on the effect that would be produced by Violet's stately beauty, but she really had not expected to see everybody fall prostrate before Prim's little flashing face. "But so it is. Vi, whether she wants to or not, seems to inspire the deep, settled kind of affection, but Prim simply turns all their heads. I don't say that Prim may not do a great deal better

than Sir John; but should she decide in his favour, it will be My lady and her ladyship with her—and it will sound nice, as you said just now; whereas, Violet, in marrying an Honourable, will be only Mrs., all said and done.”

“Ah! Violet and Faring! That seems going the way you anticipated?”

“Yes, it has all come about so naturally. As Jack’s best friend, and such a constant visitor—it can hardly end any other way, unless you put your foot down and stop it. He hasn’t spoken to you yet, has he?”

“Not a word. And I haven’t encouraged him to speak. I’ve been waiting for you to tell me it was all right. But, between you and me, I don’t understand why his mother has never been near us. He’s always saying she’s coming.”

“Yes, I must confess——” Then Mrs. Welby stopped talking and began to titter. Timesman had entered the room.

“A person, sir,” said Timesman, very respectfully, “has called to see you—on business.”

“I won’t see anybody—on business.”

“Very good, sir. I thought, perhaps, a little later——”

“Certainly not. I’m tired out.”

“Very good, sir,” and Timesman withdrew.

“You ought to get forty winks before you change your coat,” said Mrs. Welby sympathetically.

“Perhaps I will,” said Mr. Welby, replenishing his glass with old brandy. “But you were telling me about Adolphus Faring.”

“Well, you can see for yourself how it is with *him*.

On Violet's side it is certainly an inclination, but *his* devotion to her is quite touching. He follows her about—well, like a little dog.”

“Does he really?”

“He won't let her out of his sight—seems miserable the moment she's not at his side.”

“Well, well.”

“It's too apparent. Hush! Not a word. Here she is.”

And in fact Violet had opened the door from the morningroom.

“Where's Dolly Faring?” she asked anxiously. “He hasn't said good-night and gone, has he?” And she added that he was with her at the gramophone a moment ago, and then when she turned round to hand him a record he had disappeared.

“He may be in the hall,” said her mother. “Times-man has put the liqueurs there.”

“Oh, *that's* it,” said Violet, evidently relieved. “I'll go to him. He'd think it so odd if I deserted him, and left him all by himself out there.” As she spoke she hurried across the room to the other door. Then she turned. “Daddy, he wants us to take tickets for a grand fancy ball that's coming off next month. You'll be nice to him about it, won't you? I'll bring him in presently.”

And keeping her promise she reappeared after a few minutes, together with Mr. Adolphus Faring.

He was a pale clean-shaved young man, whose straight dark hair was brushed rigorously backward from his forehead in the prevailing mode, and whose eyes and other features had no expression of any sort

whatever. He must have strenuously cultivated this impassiveness, and now it was so complete as to give one a feeling that nothing on earth could ever surprise or shock him. He had a pleasant murmuring voice, an even ripple of sound without ups and downs or vibrations.

"Not sure if King and Queen comin' themselves," he said, speaking of the fancy ball, "but the others, all of 'em. So people who want to rub shoulders with Royalty will get their money's worth, don't you know. All these foreign potentates, too. Bar larks, Miss Violet, it'll be a top-hole rag," and he made the sound of a rippling laugh, without the slightest trace of mirth being perceptible on his face. "Stars of the stage, don't you know, the élite of the Stock Exchange, and what the papers call City magnates—that's you, Mr. Welby—everybody who is anybody," and he laughed again. "For charity, you know. My mother's interestin' herself in it. The date was only fixed this afternoon—July 27th. So I have told you among the very first."

"It's most awfully good of you," said Violet. "Isn't it, mummy?"

"I always appreciate Mr. Faring's consideration," said Mrs. Welby graciously. "By the way, speaking of your mother, the Countess! When may we hope for the pleasure of——"

"I think she said she was comin' to-morrow," Mr. Faring answered promptly. "Or the day after."

"That will be very nice indeed," said Mrs. Welby, with a pleased titter.

"Well now, my dear Faring," said old Welby

cheerily. "*In re* this famous ball, what will be the damage, eh?"

"The—er—what? I don't quite follow."

"It's only daddy's chaff," said Violet hastily. "He means——"

"I mean," said Mr. Welby simply, "that I want to know the price of the tickets."

And when he heard the price, he so obviously considered it an "eye-opener," even in these days, that Violet, dreading lest he should be vulgar about it, assumed her proprietorial attitude and hurried Mr. Faring away with her.

"By Jupiter!" said Mr. Welby.

"Come along," said Violet to her Adolphus. "Would you like me to sit with you in the hall, or shall we go back to the drawing-room?"

"I leave you to decide," said Mr. Faring, as Violet led him into the hall, and again he laughed. "We don't seem wanted in the drawing-room. Your sister and the old buck are carrying on so that the whole room seemed hardly big enough for 'em."

Mr. Welby, overhearing these last words, did not like them. Some of his old-fashioned ideas still lingering in his mind, he suggested that Mrs. Welby had better go to the drawing-room herself to act as chaperon.

"Oh, my dear, *quite* unnecessary," said Mrs. Welby. "It's never done. Any fussing of that sort is held to be utterly absurd—and Primrose would resent it at once. Besides, if, as I fully believe, Sir John is on the point of making a definite declaration, it is only fair to give him opportunities."

But still Mr. Welby did not like it. He said if Mrs. Welby would not go, Violet must; and, calling her in from the hall, he so instructed her. Violet was irritated but submissive.

"All right," she whispered.

"And I say," whispered her father. "Who is Sir John—I mean, exactly? I shall look him up in *Oo-Zoo*, but I want full details. You sound Faring. He'll probably know."

"Yes," whispered Violet, "I'll ask him, if I can get a chance. But won't it seem very queer—I mean, our not knowing ourselves? Doesn't Primrose know?"

Left alone once more, Mr. and Mrs. Welby spoke about their son Jack; and as they went on talking a very careworn look came into the mother's eyes, and the father's mouth drooped fretfully. So many troublesome things concerning Jack were as yet known only to Mrs. Welby; but the things that Mr. Welby knew were sufficient to worry him.

Jack was dining out, as usual. He had promised to return in time for the musical party. It would be very wrong of him if he did not go with them to the party given by Mrs. Quartz and her daughter.

"Father, dear," said Mrs. Welby, with tenderness, after a pause, "I hate being obliged to tell you, but Jack seems to have outrun the constable again. He—he has asked me to ask you if you would mind him biting your ear."

Mr. Welby got up and walked about the room. "Mother, this isn't right. It's too bad of him. How much does he want now?"

"Well——"

"Out with it."

"One thousand, if possible—five hundred without fail."

Mr. Welby waved his arms. "No, upon my soul, it is too bad of him. The second time in a month. No, it can't go on."

"I know," said Mrs. Welby, gently and deprecatingly. "There's no getting away from it. He is extravagant."

"Damnably!"

"Yes. But what we must remember is that youth will not—cannot—look at things from the point of view of age. I'm sure I've heard you say that yourself. We *must* be lenient. Jack is so splendid; he might do so well—but I won't disguise my anxiety. Sometimes I lie awake at night dreading that he is going to take a bad turn."

"Seems to me he's taken it already," and Mr. Welby sat down with a heavy, weary air.

"Oh, no!" In one way you can say that, with all his natural advantages, he has the world at his feet. In another way, of course, he is exposed to such fearful temptations. A young man subsisting on an allowance——"

"But he doesn't subsist on it—doesn't even try to. He had the first half year in advance, and it didn't last him three weeks. Yet when I told him the annual amount, he said it was a precious big one."

"Oh, *you've* done all you could reasonably be expected to do for him." And Mrs. Welby touched her husband's clasped hands affectionately. "I'm sure he understands himself how difficult it would be for you to do much more for him. No, I was only thinking myself that he'd be safer with an *avocation*. If it was

in your power somehow to set him up! If you were like Mr. Jacobson, downstairs——”

“Ah, yes. Confound that fellow!”

“If you could buy Jack a farm—or a pack of hounds—anything to *occupy* him. I do want to see him more *settled*.”

“I thought you were hoping that things would work out with Miss Quartz. If he made a rich marriage like that, well——”

“Yes, that was my great hope; but I’m afraid it’s going to be a disappointment—like so many others. She showed quite plainly that she had fallen head over ears in love with him, but he hasn’t treated her with sufficient consideration. No self-respecting girl will consent to be neglected.”

“Certainly not. Anyhow, not a girl who’s coming into half a million.”

“No, indeed. I’m glad to say Violet tells me to go on hoping.”

“She does, does she? Fetch Violet—here now.”

And he compelled Mrs. Welby to go tittering to the drawing-room and bring her elder daughter to explain at once why she still felt hopeful.

“Vi,” he said, “we were speaking of Jack and Irene. I don’t want a lot of conjectures. Do you *know* anything?”

“Yes, I do,” said Violet firmly. “I know that Irene would be his for the asking. But if he plays the fool, as he does about everything else, he’ll lose her.”

“But she hasn’t given him up?” Mrs. Welby asked anxiously. “You know that—for certain?”

“Yes, I do. I can’t tell you how I know, for it wouldn’t be honourable. Now you really must let me

get back to Dolly. He will think it so bizarre if I keep running away from him like this."

"Very good."

Mr. Welby got up, stretched himself, and seemed to be trying to cast off dull care. "Don't you bother," he said to his wife very kindly. "We'll just hope for the best, with Master Jack—and, yes, he shall have the five hundred."

"Bless you!"

"Don't mention it." Mr. Welby sighed, and then forced himself to laugh. "We mustn't let things get spoilt by fretting. Here we are, after all. Who'd have thought it? Here we sit at dinner—people with handles to their names just dropping in to take pot luck—off to a party—going to rub shoulders with Royalties next month, and blow the expense." And he chuckled. "D'you ever look back, old lady?"

"Oh, no!" said Mrs. Welby. "I look forward."

"What to?" And Mr. Welby became grave and stared at her.

"To passing through all these little anxieties and feeling more settled."

"Ah, yes. Just so. Well, I'm off to the study," and he moved slowly across the room. "I know one thing I wish for."

"What's that?"

"I wish I was ten years younger. Then I shouldn't feel so tired of an evening."

"Have your nap."

"No time. Must do those letters."

CHAPTER II

PROBABLY poor Sarah could not have caught him at a more unfortunate moment. He started at the sight of the old servant meekly sitting there in her bonnet and black jacket, looked at her glumly, and as soon as she touched on the motive of her visit, he spoke hardily and unkindly.

"Oh, yes, it's the old story, I suppose."

"The old story, sir!" Wounded to the quick, Sarah repeated his words twice. "The old story! Do you say that to me, sir? I didn't expect you to say that. It's the first time I've ever had to ask a favour."

"But why me?" said Mr. Welby testily. "Why shouldn't somebody else wait? I have to pay *my* rent—and a mighty high one. This flat stands me in over twelve hundred a year. Well, I don't go to the landlord and say, 'Owing to unforeseen expenses incurred by the family, I must ask you to let the rent run on a bit, till I have squared up with the butcher, the baker, the dressmaker, and the tailor.'"

"Oh, but it's so different," said Sarah in distress. "You know I've sunk all my money in the venture."

"May be. But you didn't set up a lodging-house to oblige me, or on my advice."

"No, sir."

"Then you can't blame me if it fails."

"It *shan't* fail," said Sarah bravely. "I'll pull it round yet. All I ask for is time."

"It isn't business to ask me to give it to you. I sold you the house on fair terms."

"Yes, sir."

"I fixed a low interest on the mortgage. I didn't haggle with you over the furniture."

"No, sir. But if you'd only just instruct Mr. Rolls not to press me——"

The library door had remained open, and Mr. Welby was talking so loudly that Mrs. Welby heard him. She came now to discover the cause of the disturbance. Sarah turned to her appealingly.

"My husband," said Mrs. Welby, "is the only judge of what is right and proper—but, of course, if he *could* stretch a point——"

"Sir, you won't say no," Sarah pleaded. "If it's only for another six weeks."

"That's the half quarter," said Mr. Welby, and he seemed to be swayed in opposite directions by his irritability and natural kindliness. "Well, if I do, understand, not a day more. It's as much for your good as mine. If your enterprise has come to nothing, the sooner you recognize the fact the better."

"Thank you, sir. You shan't regret it."

Sarah was both wounded and disappointed, but valiantly making the best of it, she smiled and spoke with cheerful gratitude. As they conducted her to the hall Mrs. Welby asked her questions, showing a certain wistful interest with regard to the old house.

"I suppose, Sarah, that you've changed the place beyond recognition?"

"Oh, no, ma'am. You'd be surprised how little I've changed. Mr. Welby's and your bedroom, with the

dressings-room—well, that, of course, is my principal suite.”

“And Primrose’s room?”

“I’ve made that a little bed-sitting-room, ma’am. . . . You’ll be glad to hear, sir, that I’ve put a new grate in Miss Violet’s room—and renewed the door in Mr. Jack’s.”

“And the old dining-room?” asked Mr. Welby, wistfully.

“Just the same, ma’am—except for small tables, of course; and two nice pictures of the King and Queen, in place of the portraits of you and Mr. Welby.”

“I might motor out and have a look at it one day.”

“I wish you would,” said Sarah, cordially. “The young ladies, too”; and she spoke with great affection. “How *are* they, ma’am?”

“Oh, quite well, thank you.”

Then Sarah had a little outburst of love that she could not repress. “Oh, I *would* like to see them—if only for a moment. I suppose I oughtn’t to ask it?”

“Yes, why not?” said Mrs. Welby, kindly. “They have guests to entertain, but——” She had gone to the drawing-room door, and, opening it, she called softly. “Violet. Primrose. Come here a moment”; and as they came to her she whispered, “It’s dear old Sarah. Shut the door.”

Violet and Primrose came into the hall, seeming very much bored. They both shook hands with Sarah.

“There they are,” said Mr. Welby, “all in their fine feathers.”

“Don’t be absurd, daddy,” said Violet. “These are the oldest rags I have.”

"Primrose, you've torn your flounce," said Mrs. Welby. "However have you done that?"

"Mummy, please don't fuss," said Primrose. "Well, Sarah, you jolly old, funny old thing, how goes it?"

"Well there! *To be sure!*" Sarah, almost overcome, brought out a handkerchief and wiped away incipient tears. Then she turned from one to the other, lost in mingled astonishment and admiration. Their bare arms and shoulders bewildered her; the brightness of their frocks made her blink; she talked volubly and rather incoherently, in order to conceal her emotions. "Aren't you afraid of taking cold, without so much as a shawl round your neck? My two dears, as I used to say. Well, they do make a lovely pair, don't they, sir? And you call him daddy now! Not father and mother as it used to be. All strange and different now, isn't it? I—I feel just anyhow. But you must forgive old Sarah, and any liberties she takes through ignorance." And she scrutinized them both more searchingly. "But I don't like to notice such dark circles round your eyes, Miss Violet. Nor yours either, Miss Primrose. You're both of you thinner too. Oh, you *are* getting thin. It's the gaiety, of course. Not enough bedtime, *I* think. And a grand party to-night—as the man-servant was saying. . . . Well now, I mustn't trespass on your kindness. Thank you, ma'am, for letting me have a glimpse of them."

Timesman stood in the lobby ready to let her out, and Sarah was going when all at once she nodded mysteriously at Violet and beckoned her away from the others.

"Miss Vi," she said, in a low voice, "I saw Mr. Carillon yesterday."

"Oh, did you?" said Violet coldly.

"Yes, looking so sad! Oh, he did look sad."

"Really?"

Sarah nodded her head. "Yes. I said I was hoping for a chance to see you, and I asked him if he had any message."

"That was very wrong of you," said Violet quickly. "You shouldn't have done that."

"I couldn't help it. He said he wasn't able to send no message that you'd care to receive; and he turns his head, so's I shouldn't see his face, and walks on. Then all in a moment he comes back, and says yes, I was to tell you *he* hadn't altered, if *you* had."

Violet stood quite still, staring straight in front of her, while Sarah made her final adieux.

"Good-night, sir. Good-night, ma'am. And a happy, happy party for you all."

A little later Jack Welby let himself in with his latch-key, and found Mrs. Welby sitting alone in the hall. After kissing her he asked immediately for news.

"Father will do it," she said; "but it has upset him."

"Sorry," said Jack carelessly, and he laughed. "Did you get the thousand out of him?"

"No—the five hundred."

"Oh, well, beggars mustn't be choosers," and Jack became gloomy. "Perhaps you can try him for the other monkey to-morrow. Where is he now?"

"Writing some letters."

"He may as well write the cheque as well as the let-

ters. Ask him, will you? I'd like to take it with me—and I want to be getting on."

"But you are coming to Mrs. Quartz's?" said Mrs. Welby, in perturbation.

"Sorry, no. I have another engagement that I can't get out of."

"Then, as Mrs. Welby implored him to do his duty, he grew more and more sombre. Standing with his back to the empty fireplace, letting her exhaust all her arguments and entreaties, he looked exactly what he was—an extremely dissipated young man. No one could have recognized in him the cheerily cynical and good-humouredly facetious city clerk of a year ago; but he had developed a quiet, self-confident swagger that carried him along in the society which he principally affected, and a sort of devil-may-care handsomeness peculiar to himself had attracted more people than the rich young lady about whom Mrs. Welby was talking.

"Jack, be reasonable—for my sake, for all our sakes. Don't throw away your chances. If you refuse to go, Miss Quartz can but take your absence as a slight. Naturally, after the encouragement she has given you, she expects you to follow it up."

"Mother," said Jack, very gloomily, "you know that I don't even consider myself free to follow it up."

"Of course you're free," said Mrs. Welby with strength. "Oh, Jack, you would verily break my heart if you didn't drop all that old nonsense."

Jack answered with a sombre face and a sneering voice.

"There's been a good deal of dropping in this family, hasn't there? Violet and Carillon! We shall get a bad name if we aren't careful."

"Don't go back to that. You know as well as I do that he wasn't *man* enough for Violet."

"And Prim and Perkins?"

"There was nothing whatever there. The very mildest flirtation. No promises of any kind."

Jack laughed. "Have it your own way, mother dear. Now run and get the cheque for me, will you? And, look here. Tell Irene I'm sorry I can't come, but I'll go for a ride with her to-morrow morning—very likely. Yes, tell her I'll ring her up early."

Then Jack went to look for his friend Dolly Faring in the drawing-room. He ruthlessly told Faring to get his hat and coat, and go out with him. Violet struggled hard to retain the use of her property, but without avail. There was to be a little game of baccarat at a certain fellow's rooms—as Jack informed Faring in a whisper.

Then he went to the library to fetch the cheque.

"It's awfully decent of you," he said to his father, "and I'm much obliged."

"Yes, but remember," said Mr. Welby, "this is the very last time."

"Oh, yes, rather," said Jack lightly. "That's quite understood." Then, going, he returned to ask a question. "I say. Who is Sir John?"

"Well, he's a baronet, to begin with."

"And to end with, I should think," said Jack scornfully. "I don't like the look of him. One of Prim's pick-ups, I suppose"; and he gave a hurried word of advice to his mother. "I shouldn't let that girl make too big an ass of herself if I were you. Bye-bye."

Next minute he and Mr. Faring left the flat.

Violet coming into the hall presently complained to her parents.

"I do think it is mean and disgusting of Jack not to spare Dolly for one evening." And she flung herself into a leather chair and fumed. "He is *too* selfish. He must have known perfectly well that I wanted to take Dolly on to the Quartzs'."

"Yes, yes, yes," said Mr. Welby. "But why have you left your sister and Sir John alone together?"

"Because two are company and three are none," said Violet curtly.

"Yes, that may be, but I don't like it. I'm telling your mother so. Your brother isn't taken with the looks of him. He thinks Primrose is going too fast, without our having got our bearings."

And, in spite of remonstrances, he insisted that Mrs. Welby should go to the drawing-room and break up the tête-à-tête. "Get rid of Primrose," he said; "and then you just drop a few hints. Sound him. Ask him what his intentions are—not straight out, of course. Use your tact."

In the drawing-room Primrose and her elderly admirer were carrying on their badinage with unabated vigour. Primrose was seated at one end of a sofa, keeping him at a proper distance by her graceful manipulation of a large fan, while she bewitched him with her prattle; and he, at the other end of the sofa, made feeble efforts to draw nearer and spluttered in admiration.

"No, adorable tyrant, I cannot accompany you to

Mrs. Quartz's music, because I, ah, don't know the lady—don't want to know the lady——”

“But if I order you to come?” said Primrose imperiously, and she flashed her eyes at him above the fan.

“Oh, ha-ha—be merciful as you are strong”; and Sir John spluttered ecstatically. “Hate concerts. Don't know one tune from another.”

“Music hath charms to soothe the savage breast.”

“But my breast isn't savage. It is all tenderness—melted by *your* charms—melted to a jelly.”

“How utterly ridiculous,” said Primrose, in a softer tone. “Why, you haven't known me a full week yet.”

“Terrible devastation can be wrought in a week. From the first day you have made me your slave.”

“A very disobedient one,” said Primrose, pouting. “Suppose I ask you to come with me as a favour—Oh, damn——”

For just then Mrs. Welby had entered the room, tittering very nervously.

“He-he-he-he. Primrose darling, daddy wants you. I will do my best to entertain Sir John during your absence.”

Primrose, pouting and sulky, departed; and her mother and the guest remained closeted together for perhaps ten minutes. Then the electric bell sounded, and both emerged into the hall. Sir John had a weary sorrowful air, while Mrs. Welby seemed agitated although struggling to maintain great dignity.

“Sir John is going,” she said. “Timesman, Sir John's hat.”

“What is it?” cried Primrose, directly the guest had gone. “Whatever has happened, I've a right to know.”

"Yes, what is it?" echoed Mr. Welby. "Not satisfactory, what? You appeared to be regularly dismissing him."

"I was," said Mrs. Welby. "*Most* unsatisfactory." And, drawing her husband aside, she told him that Sir John, when she dropped her hints, had talked in a lame and shamefaced way, declaring that although entirely enslaved by her daughter, his position was so unfortunate that he could only touch on his intentions in a very guarded manner. And he wound up by admitting that, if he had lost his heart, he could not unhappily offer his hand. "The whole thing is most painful and mysterious," said Mrs. Welby, "and I never felt so insulted in my whole life. I do believe he is simply an impostor."

"*Where Zoo-Zoo?*" said Mr. Welby, in an awful voice.

The indispensable volume, fetched from the library by Violet, threw light upon the mystery. Sir John was not an impostor. He was really and truly an ancient baronet, but he was also a married man. The entry stated the fact explicitly; "Married, 1896, Lady Adela Weavill——"

"But she may be dead," said Primrose piteously. "She can't be alive—or I'm sure he would have mentioned it."

The book, however, banished such hopes. A second entry showed that Lady Adela was very much alive, conducting a school of needlework, sitting on the London County Council, and enjoying the recreations of chess and field botany.

"That," said Mr. Welby, closing the book with a

bang, "is what you bring upon us by your recklessness. I consider, this evening, we've been made so many laughing-stocks."

"Oh, don't speak harshly to her," said Mrs. Welby.

Primrose burst into tears, and moved towards the corridor.

"Poor old Prim," said Violet, going to her sympathetically. "I *am* sorry for your disappointment. Poor dear old Prim."

"Oh, it doesn't matter," sobbed Primrose.

"There's my brave girl," said Mrs. Welby.

"I—I hadn't set my heart on him," and, supported by her sister, Primrose went sobbing down the corridor.

Violet ran back at once, and said reassuringly: "I'll get her to bed, and she'll cry herself to sleep. She'll be all right in an hour or two."

But then Mr. Welby bellowed wrathfully. He said she must not go to bed; she must go to the concert with the rest of them. He said he would not stand such degrading nonsense, and he put his foot down.

Half an hour later Mr. and Mrs. Welby and the two Miss Welbys were slowly ascending the crowded staircase in Prince's Gate. Mr. Welby had his corns touched twice, he trod on his wife's dress three times, and he was extremely red in the face before he reached the landing. But he tried to persuade himself that it was all worth while—this well-dressed and partially perspiring mob, the string band downstairs, the singers in the concert room, the flowers, the lights, the heat, were the things that well-to-do people like himself got for their money.

Mrs. Quartz, a fat little woman with a nut-brown wig, received them in a friendly fashion at the head of her stair-case. Mr. Van Horn, her father, an old bald tremulous gentleman wearing a black skull cap, gave them senile smiles from the gilt chair where he was seated with a cushion under his feet. Poor old Mr. Van Horn's mind was nearly gone; but, as the grandfather of the house, he received all honour, and was allowed to sit like this at his daughter's grand receptions just to amuse him. He knew nobody, or could remember nobody; but from time to time he crowed childishly and tried vainly to snap his fingers. Then Mrs. Quartz would turn, and, smiling at him affectionately, beg him not to make a noise. Behind Mrs. Quartz stood her only child, Irene, a fine big red-haired girl, with a kind heart but a dreadfully hot temper. Miss Irene, counting the Welby group, saw that one of the family was missing and immediately became angry. As they moved on they heard her being excessively rude to her mother.

That was Irene's way. At all times undutiful to poor fat Mrs. Quartz, she became wicked and insolent when angry.

The squash in the concert room broke up the family. Mr. Welby remained standing, and guarded his corns as best he could among the people by the door; Mrs. Welby and Violet found lodgment on a sofa by the wall, and Primrose pounced upon a chair at the end of a row. From this corner seat she soon observed that a fair, small, round-faced young man was taking notice of her.

Her spirits at once rose. She had changed her dress, having watered the other one with tears, and she began

to think she must be looking rather nice in it. Weeping had merely made her eyes brighter, and she now flashed them in all directions; she fidgetted, made quick movements of her shoulders, turned her little head this way, that way; but all the while she was acutely conscious of the round-faced boy. He was laughing while he talked to other young men; he never stopped laughing, and he looked at her in a gratifying manner. Then an Italian lady sang a song, and Primrose pretended to be enthralled by the beautiful voice; she was rapt, lost, seemingly conscious of nothing but the song. When the song was over she clapped her little hands in a frenzy of delight; and then, looking round rapidly, saw to her intolerable annoyance that the young man was not watching her any more. He had disappeared.

But he had only gone to fetch Irene and get her to introduce him. Irene came back with him, and did it—brusquely and sullenly.

“Mr. Hugo Blyth—Miss Welby.”

“Ha! ha! ha!” said Mr. Blyth, laughing joyously. “Ha! ha! ha! We have never met before—unless we met in a dream ages ago.” And he went on laughing for everybody to hear, but said quite thrilling things that only reached Primrose’s ear. “Directly I spotted you, I wanted to be introduced.”

“I wonder why on earth such a strange notion came into your head,” said Primrose. She was laughing too. “Are you often taken like that?”

“Ha! ha! ha! What a topping answer! Come down-stairs and have some supper.”

Down they went, and Primrose was all gaiety and happiness again. It was so jolly to have another slave, and so quickly. The uncomfortable memory of

that horrid old Sir John was laughed away completely.

"Ha! ha! ha! Let's sit in this corner—and eat, drink, and be merry," said Mr. Blyth. And so they went on.

"Do you ever stop laughing?" asked Primrose.

"Hardly ever. Why should I? What says the poet?"

"I haven't the faintest idea. I never read poetry."

"Ha! ha! ha! 'Laugh and the world laughs with you. Weep and you weep alone.' But no one ever made *you* weep. You couldn't do it if you tried."

"Ha! ha! ha! What makes you think that?"

"Because you're so ripping—like some jolly boy. More like a boy than a girl."

"Oh, thank you for nothing. If it comes to that, you're rather like a girl dressed up in boy's clothes. You're not very big, you know. And you're very silly," and Primrose gurgled with laughter.

"Ha! ha! ha! What things you say! You don't mind what you say, do you? Oh, you really are too ripping for words. It don't matter whether you're the boy or I'm the girl. There's two of us, anyhow—one of each sort. That's why we get on together so ripingly. Ha! ha! ha!"

Primrose loved the party now. She was as happy as a bird.

But Violet was dull and miserable without her Adolphus Faring. She had to go down to supper with her father and mother, and she felt it was a cruel humiliation.

Friendly, hospitable Mrs. Quartz had forced her way through the crowd to find the Welbys and implore them to take refreshment. She led Mrs. Welby out through

the crowd again, holding her arm and making much of her.

"There now. I'll follow you down later. I daren't go down yet—or Irene will be at me, for leaving my post." And she added confidentially: "I'm sure I hope your daughters are a comfort to you, Mrs. Welby. Mine isn't to me."

CHAPTER III

SLOWLY but surely, while the month of July hurried hotly by, the whole family realized that they had not quite enough, and that they wanted a little more. As Primrose said desperately to Violet: "We just miss success, and I don't see any point in not admitting the truth."

Mr. Welby wanted more ready money to meet the heavy claims of the hour. Bigger dividends from the mine would pull him straight later on; but the temporary embarrassments bothered him and spoilt his pleasure, making him feel too often that, although rich, he would have had to be a little richer to enjoy the proper sensation of richness."

Above all else Mr. Welby wanted more time. He felt rattled; the pressure of responsibility was always upon him; the unknown trod on his heels, forcing him to accelerate his pace, although he never reached any recognizable destination. His long experience in a warehouse was useless to him. He knew nothing whatever about financial business, and he struggled hard to conceal his ignorance, pretending to know everything, promising himself to "learn it up." This sulphur mining company practically belonged to him, and he did not really comprehend why shareholders came into it at all. Yet there *were* shareholders other than himself—for he and the secretary signed certificates concerning them, and balance-sheets and other things were being prepared for them. At those offices in the city he

was an automaton, or rather a puppet whose strings were pulled by the manager. He did whatever Mr. Bernstein advised him to do.

"If I could find the time," he said to Jack, one hot stuffy afternoon, "I'd go straight out there and look into things myself."

They were in the library at the flat. Mr. Welby, after broiling for two hours at Hurlingham, had been snatched away by Mrs. Welby just when he had begun to feel interest in a polo match, and taken to a crowded tea-party in the Bayswater Road. Before long he would have to dress, go out to dinner at a restaurant, and on to Covent Garden and the Russian ballet. During the brief respite he sat with his waistcoat open, drank a little soda water and a good deal of old brandy, and talked to Jack, who by a rare chance happened to be there.

Jack, standing on the hearthrug, made queer movements of his body, stooped slowly as if looking for some small object on the floor, raised himself slowly, stooped again, and did not listen.

"I say," repeated Mr. Welby, "I'd like to go out to Austria and see for myself."

"Then why don't you go?"

"Can't get the leisure for it."

"Would it take so long?"

"My dear boy," said Mr. Welby fretfully, "I can't even find the time to do my Swedish exercises of a morning."

"Then why don't you do 'em at odd moments, when you're bored and there's nothing to occupy you? That's what *I* do. I've been doing mine now. That's the tip. You *want* 'em, you know."

And Jack continued to exercise himself in the latest Swedish fashion, extending his arms to their full length, swinging his body round with a gentle jerk, back again, round again.

"Stop it," said Mr. Welby. "You're making me giddy. Jack, I do get giddy nowadays. What's that from? Gout? I've had some nasty twinges of gout since this hot weather began," and he emptied his glass.

Jack pointed at the empty glass, and spoke magisterially. "You know, that stuff isn't going to help you with the gout."

"Think not?" And Mr. Welby, about to refill his glass, hesitated and became slightly redder in the face. "Maybe you're right, my boy—best to keep it for after dinner, eh? Mother has the idea to take us to Homburg in August, so as I can do a cure. Well, Homburg's in Germany, and Austria's next door to Germany, I might run on and inspect the properties. You heard we're putting up new smelting furnaces?"

"No. Nobody ever tells me anything."

"Only because you won't attend to anything. You aren't really attending to me now. Yes, we're going to increase output by the most up-to-date process available. I'm guaranteeing the cost as against the future yield."

"Who advised you to do that?"

"Mr. Bernstein."

"Oh, then I suppose it's all right. You can trust Bernstein?"

"I don't know that I trust him any further than I can see him. Of course I have Rolls to look after him."

"And who looks after Rolls?"

"I do, of course," said Mr. Welby, with dignity. But then he grew still redder and a flustered look came into his broad face. "Yes, certainly, I control the whole thing."

"Good. Ta-ta, guv.," and Jack left him alone with the brandy and his thoughts.

Mr. Welby had been acting sagacity and technical knowledge to avoid letting himself down in the eyes of Jack; but behind his subterfuges there was a dogged desire to rise to the height of the situation. Fate had called him to perform weighty intricate tasks and he intended eventually to answer the call. It was not like him to shirk: he would be a real man and not a dummy.

"If only," he murmured to himself, "if only there were twenty-five hours in the day instead of twenty-four."

Then he looked at his writing-table, with its accumulated evidence of postponement and neglect. The confusion and litter of the desk seemed to pass into his mind, making the same muddle on both sides of the room. He felt again that queer pressure, as of being pushed forward, over-driven, cruelly goaded. Then he took a little more brandy. It was the sensation of pressure that made him drink brandy; and, as he knew, it was drinking brandy that gave him bilious headaches.

"Father," said Mrs. Welby, looking in at the door, "you'll be late if you don't go and dress. Timesman has put everything out for you."

"Coming, my dear," said Mr. Welby, hastily swigging off his nip.

Violet and Primrose both understood that they could not afford to dress as they ought. They struggled

hard to make a striking effect, but they were not able to put themselves in the hands of a really great artist who would do them justice. Comparatively, a little more money would have been sufficient. They were spoiling the ship for a ha'porth more tar.

Socially, too, everything would have been so much easier if they could have done things on a slightly better scale. Instead of living at Knightsbridge, they ought to have been living in Mayfair. They ought to have done their shopping in Bond Street instead of Sloane Street. They ought to have had their smart friends all round them, instead of being obliged to go and hunt for them.

In regard to their admirers, neither of them was really contented. Perhaps they might not have fretted about husbands at all, if each of them had not been anxious to get married before the other. Violet especially felt that it would make her feel "too small for words" if Primrose went off before her; and she hoped that Jack would make a rich marriage, not because she thought he deserved such luck, but because she wanted him handsomely provided for, so that Mr. Welby might be free to concentrate all his liberality on her own marriage portion.

But Dolly Faring was altogether too tame a lover. Although incessantly afraid of losing him, Violet did now honestly feel that she was merely putting up with him. Instead of carrying her off her feet by his ardour and passion, he paid her compliments that wounded her vanity—saying, for instance, that he was sure she had the maternal instinct highly developed, that he felt safe with her, and knew she would take good care of him. He spoke also, very selfishly, of his wish to live quietly

in the country and go in for poultry farming. He thought too much of himself and not enough of her. He had had his fling, whereas she had not. She had an uncomfortable feeling that if they ever went to the altar together, it would be a marriage of convenience, quite devoid of romance and glamour. And in her secret heart Violet wanted something more out of life than that.

Primrose's feelings with regard to Mr. Hugo Blyth were essentially similar in character. This curious and rapidly-formed friendship continued. Although an engagement had not been announced, he was admitted to the family as Primrose's acknowledged suitor; he possessed no entry in "Who's Who," but he had been vouched for by City experts, as belonging remotely to Blyth's Patent Food for Cattle, and having solid money behind him; he had offended and then enthralled the heads of the family by his facetiousness; he called them "Pa and Ma Welby," and declared that Mr. Welby was nothing but a great Tom-boy at heart. That mysteriously pleased Mr. Welby.

He never ceased laughing, and Primrose laughed inordinately when in his company. Laughter had taken possession of her—it prevented her from worrying about the joys that she knew she was missing. Considered as a lover, Hugo was beneath contempt; not tall enough, not broad enough, not substantial enough—a whipper-snapper, a mannikin, a laughing doll—only worth playing with; not himself wanting to be treated seriously. So Primrose laughed, and stifled thought. If she dreamed of what might have been, had Fate proved a little more generous, it was of a sort of companion that perhaps is only met with in dreams.

She imagined some splendid strong taciturn man who would say, "Stop laughing, Primrose, and come with me across the world to make a garden of love thousands and thousands of miles away from everybody else." He would, if necessary, take her and shake her, or smack her, until she came to herself. Or, on the other hand, he might be simply the fairy prince, who would say, "Primrose, you are unique. I have sought for you through the maze of life and the mists of time. Come and share my throne." Vagueness. Nonsense. Things not worth thinking of—not worth dreaming of.

"Ha! ha! ha! Ha! ha! ha!" She and Hugo went about together like two mischievous urchins, in search of thrills. He took her to a prize fight—up in an aeroplane—to a costermongers' dancing club at Bethnal Green; and these things, innocent and natural as they sound nowadays, being still rather unusual and reckless in the year 1914, people were startled. They pretended also that they had spent an evening at an opium den in Limehouse. But that was not true. They had really been sitting most respectably at the big music-hall in the Whitechapel Road. They liked to make people stare and talk; but Mrs. Welby kept from Mr. Welby all the chatter about their escapades.

As to Mrs. Welby, she, like the rest, wanted more money, and had better reason than they for wanting it; since Jack was always secretly draining her resources. The secrets of Jack worried her fearfully; concerning him there were so many things that had to be kept from Mr. Welby—the fact of his renting expensive rooms of his own in a side street off Piccadilly, his carrying on with doubtful costly ladies of the theatre, his recent entanglement with a married woman,

his shameful treatment of affectionate Irene Quartz, his callous refusal to promise that everything was over and done with about Amabel Price, his racing, his card-playing, his Stock Exchange. Jack and his affairs formed the larger burden on her spirits; the lesser one was the fact, long ago detected by Timesman, that Mr. Welby drank too much. There were July nights on which he came to her room completely fuddled. He succeeded, in getting home without disgrace; but then, feeling safe in harbour, his will power relaxed or the fumes of intoxication increased, and he showed himself to his wife in a regrettable state. Thus Mrs. Welby's trouble might be summed up: She wanted more peace of mind.

Well on in the month Mr. Welby, for the first time, presided at the annual general meeting of his company. He looked very large and grand on this occasion in a new frock coat and white waistcoat, with one of the bright purple neckties that Mrs. Welby made him wear as best suited his complexion; and, carefully prepared and prompted by Bernstein, and encouraged by deferential dummy directors on each side of him, he played his part excellently.

There were not more than twenty people in the room. A vote of thanks to the chairman for his generous treatment of the company in the matter of the smelting furnaces was carried unanimously. Mr. Welby acknowledged the compliment in suitable terms, and suggested that, their interests in Austria being so large and their relations with the government of the empire so cordial, it would be a graceful act to send a message

of condolence and sympathy. They should not, he felt, ignore the calamitous murder of the archduke.

Then one of the shareholders asked Mr. Welby if there was any danger of this crime leading to a war.

Mr. Welby replied in the negative. No, he said, they might take it from him that there would not be any war.

He said the same thing again that evening. It was at a public dinner in aid of the funds of a well-known hospital, and Mr. Welby, by reason of his lavish donation, was treated with honour, given a seat at the high table quite near the nobleman who occupied the chair, and called upon for a speech after dinner. "In our institution," said his lordship, reading a pencil note with difficulty, "the name of Mr. Welby—I should say Mr. Welby—is known and beloved by all; in the wider sphere of—ah, finance, and those commercial adventures that have made our country what it is, Mr.—ah, our good friend—is equally respected. If he can, from information naturally accessible to him but not available to us ordinary citizens—if, I say, without breach of confidence, Mr. Whibble can give us any light on the somewhat gloomy political situation of Europe—I am sure I am speaking for everyone here in this room, when I say we shall be obliged to him."

Then, stimulated and encouraged in so gratifying a manner, Mr. Welby made the oration of his life.

There would be no war. He did not profess to give them any inside view of the existing crisis; no, he left that to those directly responsible for the conduct of affairs; he looked at the whole matter from the common-sense standard, and, if he might add without arrogance, from the philosophical standard too.

"What is philosophy," asked Mr Welby, beaming grandly, "if it is not common sense in the highest form? And are we to suppose that men oo've risen to the top of the tree as prime ministers and foreign secretaries and such-like are going to act so barren of philosophy, so blind to common sense—are they going to act, with the nations behind them, if I may say so, no wiser than a pack of fools? No, certainly not. Gentlemen, I do not deny that there is danger in this continuous 'arp-ing on the war string—of which we have had far too much, both in the Press—and in other places. Maybe, a few 'ot 'eads here and there will be inflamed to a pitch of readiness to carry us over the brink. But they cannot do it," and he opened his arms widely, and spoke with even greater impressiveness. "We shall not allow them to do it. The common sense of the universe will pull them up short and sharp. Gentlemen, you can sum it up in a nut-shell. War is not a thing for to be entered into lightly. And those who rule the destinies of ours and other countries will ask themselves the very simple question: What have we to gain by war, what have we to lose by war? And the common-sense answer is of such a character, that—that—well, my lord and gentlemen, I have no 'esitation in repeating what I have stated before at the opening of these few remarks. You may take it from me— There will be no war." And, as the newspapers reported next day, Mr. Welby sat down amid loud and prolonged cheering.

The excitement of this speech and the effort it had required were very great; after it he gulped down the champagne, and sat throbbing and glowing; he felt proud, elated, and was only troubled with the thought

that he should perhaps have spoken a little louder and gone on a little longer. When he left the big room he drifted in company with affable strangers to a bar downstairs, and stood there drinking.

That night he came home palpably drunk. There was no other word for it, and Timesman used the word freely. Timesman took off his clothes for him and advised him to sleep in the dressing-room.

Very early, before the servants were up and about, Mrs. Welby came to the dressing-room, and a pitiful little scene occurred between husband and wife. She said it was the first time since the infancy of Primrose that they had passed a night in different rooms. She implored him not to drink, and she reminded him of a conversation at dinner ages ago—one evening before their money came to them, when Mr. Carillon had spoken of the moral deterioration shown by rich people. She said she had been thinking of this talk all through the night, and it had made her utterly miserable. She declared, in conclusion, that she would rather be poor again than see Mr. Welby go downhill.

Mr. Welby, contrite, made promises.

"It's all right, old girl. I have been dropping into bad ways. All I want is more open air, more exercise, more sleep. I'll have that on our holidays."

CHAPTER IV

ON one of these warm bright afternoons Jack and his friend Adolphus Faring had an ethical discussion. They were seated at the open window of a room on the first floor of a club in Piccadilly; beneath them, but unseen, the traffic rolled by ceaselessly—like life itself, which goes on at just the same pace whether you watch it or whether you turn your eyes away from it.

Jack looked out of the window, frowning gloomily. This, as he knew, was a second-class club, the sort of institution to which one is elected without delay; but he did not worry about that for the moment. His name was on the candidates' list of a better club.

"At the end of your tether?" said Dolly, echoing his last words. "But isn't that a reason for launching out rather than pulling in? Not perhaps at Chouette's, but somewhere else.

'He either fears his fate too much,
Or his deserts are small,
Who will not put it to the touch
To win or lose it all.'

That's as true of cards as of love."

They had been talking of a polite gambling hell that both frequented, and of their suspicions that some of the gentlemen they met there were professional cheats. Then this eloquent speech of Dolly's lifted the conversation to an unusually high plane.

"Dolly," said Jack, "do you think it's wrong for a fellow to marry a girl with money?"

"Of course I don't. I'm trying to do it myself."

"But if he wants the money almost more than the girl?"

"Hold hard a moment, Jack. Are you thinking about yourself or me?"

"About myself. I want your candid advice."

"And you shall have it, Jack. But now, of course, you have set me thinking about myself—and that clouds my judgment about anything else. Shall we talk about me first, and then go on with you?"

"All right. But I must say you always are damned selfish, Dolly."

"Not in the least," said Dolly; and he continued, without facial expression but in quite an animated manner: "To begin with, you have no objection to me as a brother-in-law, have you?"

"No. I'm very fond of you, Dolly."

"Thanks. The feelin's mutual. Now before I go away to my brother's for Goodwood, I want to get this thing of Violet and me settled."

"One way or the other?"

"No, *one* way, Jack—*not* the other. I want to be married by November."

"But you don't really care for Violet, do you?" said Jack, looking at him with a certain wonder.

"I do, Jack. And, what's more, we should get on very well together."

"You know, there are things I could tell you about Violet. She's not——"

"No, *please*," said Dolly impassively, yet assuming considerable dignity. "Violet will take me with her

eyes open, and I want to take her with my eyes closed. You know what I mean. Let bygones be bygones, on *both* sides. It is my intention to treat your sister uncommonly well—and, as I say—we shall do all right. She likes me in a nice motherly way—and I feel the greatest respect for her. I have no doubt in the matter, Jack. That is, I have only *one* doubt.”

“What’s that?”

“Your father! Is your father really prepared to fix up Violet as she expects?”

Jack looked round the room and drew his chair closer to Dolly’s.

“It’s difficult to answer,” he said confidentially. “The governor’s so dam’ close about his affairs. Anyhow, it won’t be *my* fault if he doesn’t do Violet really proud. *I’ve* done nothing to come between my sisters and their expectations.”

“That’s most awfully good of you, Jack,” said Dolly, with genuine feeling.

“No—but there it is. If I had bitten the gov’nor’s ear to anything but a laughably trifling extent, I should never have got into the infernal mess that I *am* in.”

“Devilish hard luck on you.”

“Don’t think I’m running the old fellow down. No, he’s just a trump at heart, but he came into the splosh too late in life. He simply *can’t* bang it about. Parting *hurts* him. I can tell you I feel more and more humiliated every time I touch him for a bit of ready. He makes one feel as if one was simply sponging on him, and I don’t mind owning I’m fairly fed up with it.”

"But there is plenty, isn't there?"

"Of course there is. And when it comes to putting it down for the girls, I should say, on the whole, he'll part better in bulk than in driblets. My tip to you and Violet would be, do it all through the lawyers. Don't ask him direct. Let the solicitors put it up to him—give him a figure that they consider proper for a man in his position. Best of luck, anyhow."

"Thanks. Much obliged, Jack." And Mr. Faring rose from his deep chair and stretched himself. "Oh, by the way, you were going to ask me something."

"It doesn't matter," said Jack, becoming gloomy again; and, rising too, he looked out of the window.

"No, but command me. My mind is now entirely free."

"Suppose a case," said Jack. "A fellow has entangled himself with a girl; he is really fond of her; but he's so dashed hard up that he can't see daylight ahead if he sticks to her."

"As I have indicated," said Dolly, very dignified and solemn, "I don't believe in love and passion and all that; but I do believe in treating people fairly." Then without a movement of his smooth mask he made the sound of gentle laughter. "If your friend hasn't the means to marry the girl, he'd be acting very badly if he did it."

"You think he would?"

"I should call it selfishness of the worst sort. Just to gratify his fancy, he risks the happiness of two people."

"Suppose the case is further complicated. Suppose the fellow sees a chance of pulling himself straight

by marrying another girl—a girl with money?”

“I don’t see how he can hesitate,” and Faring again gave his phantom laugh.

“Dash you, I’m in deadly earnest,” said Jack, turning from the window fiercely. “Stop that cackling. Dolly, look here—no rot. You consider yourself a gentleman, a man of honour.”

“Now you’re overwhelming me.”

“At any rate, you pride yourself on never having done a dirty trick.”

“Jack, I admire your delicacy very much. And, of course, I haven’t a notion as to who is the young lady you intend to throw over; but, as between pals, is there any reason why you shouldn’t speak openly of your intentions concerning Irene Quartz? It is Irene, of course?”

Jack owned that this guess had hit the target; and Dolly, as one who hoped to be a brother-in-law, strongly urged him to snap up Irene without further shilly-shally. He said that he was in a position to give the All-right signal with regard to Irene. Irene was rumbo. Irene had the goods.

“How are you so sure about it?”

Dolly explained that a man he knew had proposed to Irene last year, and being a careful sensible sort of fellow, he had investigated everything beforehand. There was a will at Somerset House which Jack could see for himself by paying a shilling. Irene would come into possession of her money, anyhow, at the age of twenty-five, and at once if she married with the consent of her guardians. Later on there ought to be a lot more from the cracked grandfather through the mother. Dolly said his friend had decided that the best tip

would be to do a bolt with Irene. Marry her first and worry it out afterwards. He added that all his friend's labour had been wasted because Irene refused. "Irene wasn't taking any."

"I suppose you mean it was yourself," said Jack gloomily.

"Well, since absolute candour is to be the order of the day, it was," said Dolly. "There's nothing disloyal to Violet in that," he added. "It was before I'd ever seen your sister."

Then he asked Jack to join him for another flutter at cards that evening.

"Sorry," said Jack, "I'm engaged."

"Can't you chuck the engagement?"

"No, I can't do that," said Jack firmly.

Then Dolly departed from the club.

Jack presently walking westward with the afternoon sunlight full upon him looked quite splendid. His top hat shone, his patent leather boots flashed, his face was refulgent; he had a sort of defiant blackguardly comeliness about him that made women glance at him swiftly as he passed by. He swaggered, pushed his hat back, as if determined to outstare the sunbeams. But inwardly he was miserable. He felt, as he had said, at the end of his tether; he had been going the pace too fast in too many directions, and he blamed the universe as well as himself for all his difficulties.

He wanted more money—that went without saying. He wanted considerably more. As he swaggered along by Hyde Park Corner, through the park, and past the barracks, each thing that he saw suggested a further want. He wanted to be an officer in the Household Cavalry; to have been born a duke; to own one of

those houses as big as palaces, to bring home the girl who loved him, and instal her there. He wanted everything—to belong to the ruling classes instead of merely the moneyed classes, to have power, to have fame too, to be illustrious, so that people would not only turn and look after him and cheer him in this crowded London, but almost in any capital of Europe where he might chance to show himself. Every moment his wants seemed to grow vaster and more impossible to satisfy.

Then, close to the Prince of Wales Gate, he stopped and passed his hand across his eyes, as if for a moment taken with giddiness. He had a queer sensation of having thought all this before. Surely, once before, a long time ago probably, he had these very same thoughts of limitless requirement and insatiable craving? Or was it somebody else to whom he had heard such thoughts attributed?

Suddenly he remembered. It was the old man—the things said by the old man when he sat huddled in his chair, staring at the limitless view from the landing window.

Jack shrugged his shoulders and went on walking.

That was all nonsense about his preposterous exaggerated desires; but more he must have, or he simply could not go on. He thought now, definitely, of the only chance that seemed to offer for getting the little more that was vital to his security. Irene Quartz. If he married that half million, the road would be open before him; he would no longer be obliged to live from hand to mouth, he could go into Parliament, establish himself, and no doubt earn money for him-

self after the starting impetus given by his wife's money.

Mrs. and Miss Quartz were both at home. The servants at the big corner house in Prince's gate threw back the doors with glad though silent welcome. It was as if the house itself as well as the young lady upstairs was anxiously expecting him.

"At last!" said tall red-haired Irene, smiling at him. "We thought we were never going to see you again."

"Yes, so we did," said fat Mrs. Quartz, pulling herself up from a sofa.

Irene soon said something curt and rude to the old lady, who then retired and left them alone.

Yes, there was solid money here. Jack, glancing round, felt the wealth under his feet, over his head, on all sides of him. And the girl was not bad either—a big fine creature, with that hair of hers; a firm neck, a white skin, passionate eyes, and a mouth that seemed longing to utter pretty words now instead of rude ones. Only Jack did not really care for her.

Why should she on her side care for Jack? Why was she so desperately in love with him? Principally no doubt because of his carelessness, his overbearing manner, his tacit refusal to woo her; he seemed to her different from everybody else; she was charmed while being tortured by his seeming always to put her off, just at the very moment when she hoped he was beginning to run after her. She felt, above all, an absolute conviction that, unlike the other young men she had known, he thought, whether well or ill, of her herself, and that never once had he given even a passing thought to her money.

She took him to the sofa that still bore the print of her mother's weight on it, and there they sat side by side. He condescended carelessly to take one of her hands and hold it; and under this contact she thrilled delightedly, and her eyes became all soft and dreamy. She pleaded that he would spend the evening with her.

"Sorry—engaged."

"Can't you get out of your engagement?"

"No—afraid not."

But Irene continued to plead, getting a little angry, saying finally that he must stay with her, and that if he refused she would know that he did not care for her the least little bit.

And at last Jack consented. He said he would stay, if he might write a note and send it off by a district messenger. Irene, enraptured by this triumph, took him to her own lovely writing-table and brought out her favourite ornamental pen.

In fact, Jack had promised to spend the evening with Amabel Price. He sat staring at the glazed creamy paper, with the grand embossed address—200, Prince's Gate, S. W., Telephone, Kensington 789624; then he dashed off three hurried lines of excuse, and fastened the envelope.

"Now, may I go down and send it off?"

"I have rung," said Irene. "Don't you trouble. They'll attend to it all right."

"No, I'll do it myself," said Jack.

And he went downstairs, and waited in the hall until the messenger boy arrived. The note safely dispatched, he came slowly upstairs to rejoin Irene.

He put his hands on her shoulders, looked at her,

and said: "Now, young woman, I've let you have your own way for once."

Irene put her hands behind his neck and kissed him.

Amabel, in a mean little room in a horrid side street near Chelsea parish church, received the note while she was dressing for the so-long-promised and so-long-postponed happy evening with the man she loved. She read the note and began to cry.

CHAPTER V

A MABEL had been very unhappy throughout this time.

She loved Jack as much as ever, and always she was desperately trying to believe that he remained faithful to her. His careless neglect was not real selfishness, he was only passing through a phase; all this wild conduct was no worse than that of other rich young men. Some day soon he would grow tired of frivolity and be to her again what he used to be. Then she would forgive him all the pain that he had caused her. Yes, as long as his love remained unshaken, she could pardon everything else.

But more and more frequently now came the dreadful hours when she doubted his good faith.

The money that should have brought them together had kept them apart. Jack had become rich and Amabel was still poor; they were now in quite different worlds, and when Jack gave her a few glimpses of his new life by taking her to crowded suburban race-courses, or leaving her in verandahs of club-houses while he played rounds of golf for absurd wagers with players as unskilful as himself, she felt at once the insuperable difficulty about costume. She was ashamed of her humble frocks, her cheap hats, her too often washed gloves; and, what was worse, Jack did not conceal the fact that he was ashamed of them too.

Jack, spending his father's money like water, was angry because she would not let him give her some

of it. Such a trifling amount could have sufficed to fit her out and make her comfortable. She had to tell him very plainly that a girl of her sort can accept household expenses and pin money from only one man—her husband.

He explained to her that for a dozen different reasons it was impossible to hurry on their marriage. It would be fatal to marry without his father's consent, he must bring the old boy round little by little; they really must be patient. Meanwhile they could both enjoy life as much as possible.

But Amabel had no spirit for enjoyment as he understood the word. Since she declined to wear the pretty frocks that would have made him proud of being seen with her in public, he suggested various arrangements for seeing her in private; and here again she was forced to incur his displeasure by another refusal. He wished to take her to those secret bachelor rooms of his, and was really angry with her when she resolutely declined to go.

"Jack," she said piteously, "don't ask me to do things that you must know aren't right. How *can* I? What would you think of me afterwards if I weakly agreed?"

"I should think that you'd been sensible and kind," said Jack, as if righteously indignant, "instead of making a fuss about nothing. . . . Well, then it amounts to this. We'll meet whenever I can manage it. But I must say you make it all jolly difficult for me."

What a speech, what a cruel inversion! She, it seemed, was making things difficult for him! Oh, Jack!

She hung her graceful head; she would not protest, she would not reproach him. No matter what he said

or did, she loved him. She had given something into his care so completely that she could not now recall it: she could only pray that, although a rough custodian, he would not break it.

Thus, in this pleasant summer weather, while the Welby family were flaunting it so gaily, Amabel continued to taste the cup of peculiar bitterness in which the ingredients are poverty, neglected love, and deferred hope. She went on humbly working and waiting.

That most odious of all men, Mr. Hector Lyme, finally dismissed her from his employ, and after two temporary jobs she found a stool in the offices of an auctioneer and estate agent not far from Sloane Square.

Tall, thin, hateful Mr. Lyme had become an M. P.; he had made a striking maiden speech; he flourished exceedingly. Already he had persuaded one or two other people to speak of his career, as well as always speaking of it himself. His conduct to his attractive secretary was abominable, in one style or another, all the time that she remained with him.

For a long while he bullied her consistently.

"Now, Miss Price, wake up, please. Where are those letters? I say, where are those letters? Thank you. Try not to go to sleep on busy mornings. Time and tide wait for no man—nor for dilatory young ladies either. I have my career to think of, you know; and I should be greatly obliged, while you are in my service, if you would occasionally bear it in mind also."

Moreover, he set her little humiliating tasks that he knew quite well do not come within the scope of a

secretary's duties. He sent her on messages—even to his valet.

"Miss Price, be so good as to go and tell Small that I shall wear a black tie and dinner jacket this evening—not a white waistcoat. . . . Please remind Small that my dress shirts were disgracefully washed last week. Get him to give you the address of that washerwoman and write her a strong letter of complaint. Stop. I'll tell you what to say. Begin, 'Mr. Hector Lyme is both surprised and annoyed'— But, no, you ought by now to be able to write a letter of that sort without me telling you word for word. When you have got the address, make a draft of the letter."

Amabel always meekly obeyed him. One cannot afford to turn against one's daily bread merely because it tastes nasty. And he of course knew that. This was his way—to take advantage of people; and his secret, ever-increasing grievance against necessitous Miss Price was that he could not take advantage as much as he wished. But he had not renounced the game. Perhaps he was trying to break her spirit, and thinking that with every fresh petty outrage he was drawing nearer to the desired end.

Then one morning, when he was dictating notes for a speech and his ideas would not come, he nagged so cruelly that she burst into tears. He either was or pretended to be very sorry for having made her cry. Anyhow his tone changed. He wanted himself to dry the tears with a coloured silk handkerchief, calling her "silly child," saying she ought to know that his bark was worse than his bite; also reminding her how he had always admired her, praising her soft pretty hair,

and attempting to smooth it where it had become disordered. In other words he tried to make love to her; and Amabel found herself back at the beginning of things, again compelled to fight for self-respect as well as for wages and meals.

Rebuffed, he fell once more to bullying, and so went on, until one afternoon he again made her cry. On this occasion perhaps he thought her spirit was really broken at last.

When rebuffed for the second time, he lost his temper and gave Amabel the sack.

"Yes, you may go," he said, and he walked up and down the room mouthing and gesticulating. "Take a week's pay, or a month's pay, anything you like, only for goodness' sake go and leave me alone. I won't have you here—sitting there upsetting me and making me think about you when I ought to be thinking about my career and nothing else." Then at the fireplace he turned his back and kicked the bars of the empty grate. "Mine is a temperament that cannot brook opposition; that's why I've worried about you. You have chosen to oppose your will to mine all along, and I won't stand it any more. So you can just clear out—and let me have a little peace. If you'd been sensible, I'd have been nice to you—yes, nicer than I've ever been to anybody." And in his anger he said such amazing things that Amabel shrank away surprised and horrified. "You think because you've got a long nose and a pointed chin that everybody's going to fall down and worship you. Not a bit of it. Presumption. Impertinence. Your whole attitude is deceit— This side of the ropes forbidden; keep off the grass; don't touch the wax models—but all the time you're just

a cold-blooded coquette. You're the worst type of girl it was ever my misfortune to meet—a calculating tease. And you thought you'd got me in your power by such stale old tricks. But no, I cut myself free of the annoyance—and I go on with my career."

Glad, indeed, was Amabel to escape the sound of the rasping, wrathful voice, and breathe the open air of the street. She felt quite dazed by his violence.

Unfortunately this was not the end of Mr. Lyme. Far from it. A month or two later chance brought her and Mr. Lyme face to face on the pavement outside her auctioneer's office. She was going home after the day's work, and, without asking permission, he walked by her side along the King's Road.

He was all smiles and honey, talking himself and ignoring her silence; then gradually getting her to answer his polite inquiries as to what she was now doing and how she liked her new work. And suddenly he told her that her place with him was always open, and he would be only too glad if she would come back and fill it.

"Miss Price, I do miss you dreadfully. I don't push ahead of a morning. My thoughts wander. You used to keep me up to the mark."

And in spite of herself, he made her laugh by his description of the girl who was now helping him.

"Miss Price, she is horrid, after you. She's large and blonde, like one of those insipid batter puddings that you get at bad hotels—you know, a lace thing round her neck like the white sauce round the pudding. She's the sort of person who means well and never stops making mistakes. *You* were so quick to pick up the hang of things. She wears a gold-rimmed pince-

nez, and she suffers from adenoids, but thinks she is now too old to have them removed. She breathes so hard that I can hear her in the passage before I open the door. Her name is Miss Grampus."

"Oh, Mr. Lyme," said Amabel, laughing because she couldn't help it, "that *can't* be her name."

"It *is*," said Mr. Lyme.

Amabel stopped at the corner leading to her own street and bade him good-night.

"Ah, you don't want me to go any further. Very good. I won't pester you." Then, taking off his hat, he spoke in earnest entreaty. "Be generous. Wipe out the past and come back to me. I can't get on without you."

He had said he would not pester her, but that was exactly what he did. After this first chance meeting he used to lie in wait for her, so as to walk with her to her lodgings. She could not shake him off. He made himself gay and amusing, he wooed her, he nagged at her. There was a word used once or twice by Jack that was frequently on his loose lips. He implored her to be *sensible*, and let him establish her in some jolly little house where she could have pretty things about her. He prayed that he might be allowed to do something, however small, to show his disinterested affection. Then in a moment he would be rating her. He swore that she had come between him and his work, she was jeopardizing his whole career, she was playing the devil with him. And next moment he became soft and apologetic.

"Amabel, forgive me. It's a compliment, really. Amabel, be nice. Why that frown? I know. Be-

cause you don't like me to use your christian name. Is that it?"

"Of course it is," said Amabel, hurrying on.

"Why were you called Amabel if people aren't to remember it? I *will* call you Amabel. You know what the name means and all it implies? It means love—who or what is loved and to be loved—derived from the Latin verb known to every schoolboy—even Board-school boys. Amo, amas, amat. So there! Amabel, I love you, I long for you, I can't live without you."

Indeed, he did now truly long for her. He could not drive her out of his mind. He was haunted night and day by the slender, evanescent ghost of her. Sometimes when he was more than a mile away, say on the terrace of the House of Commons, he saw her eyes with the white lids flickering and the long dark lashes giving him glimpses of sweet liquid depths. He saw her little hands in the shabby gloves. He saw the delicate curve of a pale averted cheek, or the swift adorable sunlight when for a moment she turned and reluctantly smiled. When he saw these things at a distance he simply had to dash off and persecute her by seeing them close by.

But it was her herself that he wanted now—a little more than the mere pretty outer shape. As much as could be possible to such a man, he felt real love for her.

Thus, in these dreadful talks, the value that Mr. Lyme put upon Amabel's favour was always rising. So to speak, he was always giving a higher quotation to it.

"Amabel," he said at last, "let's make a real partnership of it—a fighting alliance. You and I against all the world. I want a woman like you in my life to inspire me. You'll lift me, you'll urge me on. I'll do great things, I'll make you proud of me. Try it. If we hit it off—if it *works*—we can legalize the bond and make it permanent. . . . No, I can't let go your hand. Amabel, don't be so cruel. Oh, damn! Oh, curse."

And Amabel thought, Where was Jack? Why wasn't he here at her side to protect her? Why did he leave her alone drinking the bitter cup to its dregs?

About nine o'clock on a stifling warm night she heard a motor horn hooting aggressively beneath the window of her poor little room. It was Mr. Lyme in his open touring car. He would not go away, and the landlady said she must descend to the street "to pacify the gentleman."

"Amabel," he whispered, "come for a spin with me into the country. It's such a gorgeous night. Get a warm cloak and come with me. Yes, you must, you must. We'll go spinning away to Maidenhead, all through the lovely quiet night," and Mr. Lyme was at once poetical and shrewdly argumentative. "We'll see the moonlight on the water, we'll hear the whisper of the trees. It'll do you all the good in the world—just a breath of fresh air after that stuffy office, and you'll go to your work to-morrow morning with oxygen in your lungs instead of feeling worn-out and half dead. Now run in and get your hat." And then Mr. Lyme said things that for the very first time made Amabel think of him almost tolerantly. "Only two hours, Amabel, for your own good. Because it makes

me happy to have you at my side, just only as a companion, you can't grudge me that. I'm not thinking of myself. I give you my word of honour I won't so much as touch your hand. I won't pay you a single compliment. You needn't even speak to me if you don't like. You can just close your sweet eyes and dream, till I bring you safe back again."

Amabel refused to accompany him and went upstairs to her close and airless little room, while he drove away blowing his horn and blaspheming horribly.

Except that she dared not give him the least countenance or encouragement, she would have loved to go. It would have been rapture to get out of this crowded sweltering town, to drink the pure clean night air, to watch the grey trees and white fields flitting past, to see the moonlight on the water. Those two hours would truly have done her good. In imagination she could feel the night breeze beating on her hot forehead and the oxygen going into her tired lungs.

And she thought that not once had it occurred to Jack, who possessed a grand touring car, to come and give her such a treat. He could have done it safely, for no one would be able to see her shabby clothes in the dark!

In the week that followed she felt miserably unhappy; she was continually persecuted by Mr. Lyme, and doubts as to the intentions of Jack tortured her. However, after many disappointments, he was soon going to spend an evening with her. She counted the days till then.

The evening came, only to bring with it another cruel disappointment. When she read his letter briefly telling her that he was compelled once more to postpone

their meeting, she felt absolutely hopeless. His love must be quite gone, or he could not be so unkind. And nearly all that night she lay weeping.

In the morning, although she looked ill and shaky, she went to her work as usual; but she asked and obtained leave to absent herself for a couple of hours after the mid-day break. She felt an imperious need to see Jack and to talk with him. Both her courage and her hope rose as she thought of their interview. She determined that nothing should ever make her believe him false until he proved himself false; but she determined also that she would put him to the proof forthwith. Gentle and meek as she was, she felt a hot revolt against any further submission.

She went first to Knightsbridge, where the porter of the flats told her that Mr. Welby, junior, was not in the building. He had not been there since yesterday.

She had written a note, but she would not leave it for him. Outside the great red-brick pile she stood hesitating for a moment. Then she made up her mind. She would go next to Jack's private rooms. She had always refused to go there; indeed, until yesterday she had not even known where his rooms were situated. But now the time was past for scruples. She wanted to find him, and that was the most likely place. She fetched his letter from her pocket and glanced at the address on the thick paper, in order to make sure that she correctly remembered the number. Two hundred, Prince's Gate—yes, that was it. She turned and walked back to the imposing residence of Mrs. and Miss Quartz.

Already overwhelmed by the grandeurs of the Welby family, she saw nothing in the aspect of this magnif-

icent corner house to suggest that it was altogether too fine for the bachelor quarters of even such a regal spendthrift as Mr. Jack. Nor did the stately footman, the solemn butler, the marble-flagged hall, which were disclosed by the open door, surprise her.

On the other hand the servants seemed surprised.

She stood just inside the door, and as she stood there, shyly asking for her sweetheart, it chanced that the tall and splendid Irene crossed the marble pavement to the foot of the stairs and heard her inquiries.

"Come here, please," said Irene, with a grandly condescending air, and she questioned Amabel.

"Yes," said Amabel, "I wanted to see Mr. Welby if possible. If not, I have a note for him."

"Very well," said Irene, taking the note out of her hand, and she questioned Amabel suspiciously.

"No," she said, "he does not live here."

"Oh, I am so sorry I have made a mistake," said Amabel, and she stretched out her hand to recover the note.

"That's all right," said Irene. "I'll see that he gets it. He comes here often."

"I would prefer to have it back," said Amabel, still with outstretched hand. "It is rather urgent."

Then for a moment or so the two girls stood looking at each other, both of them pale and intent, both breathing fast. And then Irene, with the note firmly held, turned her back, and went up the broad staircase, saying something over her shoulder to the servants.

Amabel was shown out to the street.

She stood upon the pavement feeling a prey to many emotions. She was confused, worried, agitated, and, though so meek and gentle, very indignant too. Where

was Jack? Why did he write letters from the house of that odious insulting red-haired girl?

She hailed a passing taxicab, sprang into it, and told the driver to take her to Jack's Piccadilly club. She knew the address of that.

But he was not at the club. It being a large second-class club, the hall-porter did not feel sure whether he was there or not; and Amabel had to stand in the hall, stared at by every man who came in or out, compelled to change her place from moment to moment because of luggage arriving and departing, while a buttoned boy went all over the premises and shouted in a shrill, mournful voice: "Mr. Welby, please," so that all the staring men should know for whom she stood waiting. When the boy returned with the definite result of no Mr. Welby, poor Amabel craved permission to sit at a table in the corner of the hall and use the writing materials on it. Sitting there, she wrote Jack another note—a more urgent note; then, leaving it with the hall porter, she hurried back to the office by omnibus.

She had outstayed her two hours' leave; the people at the office were rude to her, and told her to put her back into it now till closing time.

She plodded on at her typewriting machine, in the upstairs room where she and other female drudges did the common uninteresting work, hidden away from all the life and excitement of the ground-floor offices, and she felt humiliated, desperate, utterly wretched.

So far as excuses for Jack were concerned, she had—in his own phrase—reached the end of her tether. Of Mr. Lyme she thought with horror and a little fear. She had begun to be frightened by his cruel persistence. And this afternoon there came into her

mind keenly regretful memories of that Mr. Wright, that good kind honest middle-aged creature, the only really chivalrous man that she had ever encountered. She thought of the Bickley house—the snug little box with the trim garden, the mound, and the view of the Crystal Palace. But for Jack, she would have been safe out there; cherished, honoured, and guarded by a faithful husband. It would have been honest humdrum affection. Why had she not taken it when she was given the chance? Why had she wanted a little more than that?

No doubt Mr. Wright had married somebody else by now—and she hoped he was very very happy. He deserved to be.

A little before tea-time Jack looked in upon Irene at Prince's Gate. He came straight from Hurst Park race-course, where he had heavily backed some losers, and then feeling disgusted had left immediately after the three-o'clock race. Now, as he mounted the Quartz staircase and touched with a dandified lordly air its golden balustrade, he thought again of the solid wealth of the house. Very likely all the decoration might be bad taste, but it represented substantial capital. With this behind him a fellow could be much more at ease.

He saw at once that there was something queer with Irene; her manner seemed abrupt, and she caught her breath and stood panting when she had given him Amabel's note.

"Oh, this is nothing," said Jack, putting the envelope in his pocket.

"How can you tell until you have read it?" said

Irene, gaspingly. "Read it," and she stamped her foot. "Ah, you are afraid to read it."

Jack laughed; then he moved to one of the big French windows, opened the letter, and read it.

"Now let me read it," said Irene.

"Oh, no, my dear."

"Bring me that letter here," cried Irene passionately. "I insist on reading every word that girl has written."

"Why do you want to?"

"Because I don't trust you. Ah!" Jack was tearing the letter into fragments, and Irene raised her voice almost to a scream. "I knew it. You are a coward and a traitor."

Jack threw the little bits of paper out of the window and watched their dancing flight over the balcony. Then he laughed again as he moved toward the door.

"Good afternoon, Irene."

"Of course," said Irene, with a sudden change of tone, "if you have any possible explanation to offer!"

"I have no explanation to offer you, my dear, either about this or anything else."

"I hate you!" Irene shouted. "I hate you! I hate you!"

Jack went downstairs and out of the house.

Irene rushed to her mother and was fearfully rude to her; then she lay upon her bed and wept; then she sat down and wrote a letter to Jack, and sent it off by her maid. In the letter she asked him to forgive her for having been so violent.

Meanwhile he had gone straight to Sloane Square to see Amabel. Entering the ground-floor offices of the auctioneer, he looked so grand and careless that the clerks felt sure he meant to buy a large estate without

haggling over terms; they were disappointed when he said he merely wanted one of their type girls, and they sent him out of the front door to a little side door, where he waited at the foot of a steep flight of stairs till Amabel came down to him. He was angry with her, but at sight of her drawn face and tired eyes he felt compunction. Moreover, there was something queer in her manner, just as there had been in Irene's.

Curbing his irritation, he gravely reproved her for having gone to hunt for him at the house of friends. Such a silly thing is never done, he told her. It makes people talk and wonder. "You couldn't have done anything worse, unless you had gone to hunt for me at my club."

Amabel confessed that she had done that too.

This confession made him very angry, and he spoke unkindly but not brutally.

"Is that all you have to say to me?" said Amabel, watching his face.

"Yes, I'll say no more," and he shrugged his shoulders. "Dear old Mab, it doesn't matter really. But you have done your best to make me look foolish."

"Jack," said Amabel, putting her hand on his arm, "who is that girl?"

"She's a friend of Vi's."

"Tell me the truth. What is she to you?"

Jack laughed; but his laugh was embarrassed, not hard and mocking, as it had been just now with Irene.

"Amabel, my pretty one, we can't stand talking here. It's too ridiculous."

"Yes, but I must speak to you. All this is not going on, you know. I demand a full explanation."

"Well, come along. We'll go to a tea-shop."

But Amabel was unable to leave her work. She asked him to wait for her till six o'clock, when the office closed. He could not do so, and she asked him to give her the evening; she would meet him anywhere after six. But he could not do that, either.

"Jack," she said, holding his arm, "I tell you I must speak to you. I'm not going to be trifled with any longer. I need your help. I need what I've a right to expect from you—truth and not deception."

Finally he appointed her to meet him at the Welby flat on the following evening, and, in spite of her great reluctance, he insisted that she should agree to this.

"You know how they treat me," she said. "They don't want me there. Your mother hates the sight of me."

"The mater will herself write and ask you to dinner to-morrow," he said. "I may be a little late—but you mustn't mind that. They are going to a fancy dress ball. You and I will have a real good quiet yarn while they're dressing themselves up for it."

Then he went back to Knightsbridge and compelled Mrs. Welby, very much against her will, to invite Miss Price to dinner.

At the flat he found Irene's letter, marked "Immediate," with three great frantio dashes under the word. Irene implored him to show his forgiveness by ringing her up on the telephone at their usual hour of 11 P. M.

He did not do so, because at that time he was otherwise occupied—playing baccarat and losing largely.

CHAPTER VI

IT was the night of the carnival ball, the culminating event of this brilliant season; and, as Mrs. Welby remembered long afterwards, everything seemed to be going wrong all through the evening from the moment that Timesman announced dinner.

"What's the matter with that girl?" said Mr. Welby. "Is she ill, or sulky, or what?"

"Hush!" said Mrs. Welby; for Amabel Price was only a few yards away from them, as she passed with the others into the dining-room.

"And why is she here at all?" said Mr. Welby. "I don't like it."

"I know. It's wrong. But Jack made me invite her."

"And doesn't come home himself! Upon my word, he is the limit."

They all sat down, and Mr. Welby pulling himself together tried to be happy and genial, but failed. The fact was he had so many matters on his mind. He felt bothered, because his manager, Mr. Bernstein, had gone off without orders or permission to Vienna. For three days those people at the company offices had been plaguing the chairman for instructions, and in the absence of Bernstein the chairman was totally incapable of giving instructions. Bernstein knew everything, and Mr. Welby still knew nothing.

"Have some more oysters, Miss Amabel. They're nourishing. Make a good dinner." He said it in a

hospitable but patronizing tone, as if well aware that a person in Miss Price's walk of life did not get the chance of a good dinner every day of the week.

"An old school-friend," Mrs. Welby whispered to Adolphus Faring, and then had such an access of tittering that she spilt her soup.

Dolly Faring and Hugo Blyth, who had never seen her before, looked at Amabel curiously, and the girls as well as their mother thought that she needed a good deal of explaining away. Seated there, pale and silent, with Jack's empty chair on her left hand, she seemed strangely out of place; her simple blouse and black hat formed such a contrast to the splendour of her old companions. Violet was in mauve and silver, Primrose in scarlet and gold, both frocks having fashionably low bodices. "I call it too bad of Jack," Violet had said when she heard that Amabel was coming to dinner. "I'll never forgive him for this."

With the fish Hugo Blyth annoyed Mr. Welby by laughingly declaring that there was going to be a European war.

"There will be no war," said the host severely. "And let me tell you, sir, if there *was* a war it would be no laughing matter. You and a many others would be laughing t'other side of your face before it was over."

"Ha-ha-ha! Bravo, Pa Welby," said Hugo unabashed, indeed delighted. "I was only pulling your leg. Go on—tell us some more."

"I do not think only of myself, when I say war must be averted at all costs," said Mr. Welby less severely. "It is not only people like me with large interests on the continent, but humble folk at home

here in England who would suffer. A war, however short, would entail a vast deal of unemployment; life would be rendered difficult to all who were not engaged in safe jobs and essential trades."

"Ha-ha-ha. Keep it going. Ma Welby, he's as good as a book."

"Timesman," said Mr. Welby, in order to change the conversation, "you ordered the car, of course?"

"Yes, sir. Eleven-forty sharp."

"That's right," said Dolly Faring. "It's only supposed to begin at midnight, but I should advise you to get there early. There'll be an awful squash."

"You hear that?" said Mr. Welby. "Let me see you all ready in the hall by eleven-thirty."

Then they talked of the ball. Mr. Faring described the fabulously rich costumes and the magnificent jewels that would be worn by certain grand ladies, citing the historic pearls of a duchess and the world-famous emeralds of a princess. This talk about the jewels enervated Violet and her sister, for of course neither possessed such treasures.

"Oh, stop it," cried Primrose at last. "Muzzle him, Vi. He's making me feel as if we might just as well throw up the sponge."

"Ha-ha-ha. Throw up the sponge! How ripping. What things she says. Muzzle him."

But, unmuzzled and impassive, Dolly Faring continued; telling them now of the royal procession, the royal supper in a specially prepared room, and the royal quadrille to be danced in a space cleared for it with crimson silk ropes. Some of the smartest men in town would hold the ropes and keep back the pressing throng of enraptured spectators.

Then all at once Mr. Welby interrupted him with frowning sternness. "Hold hard. Stop a bit. Let me get my bearings, please. What's all this about ropes and special suppers?" And he went on to say that he had bought the tickets on the plain understanding that he was to rub shoulders with royal personages. Was that the bargain or not? If so, what was this talk of being roped off, pushed into corners, and herded this way that way like a pack of vulgar sheep?

And he had quite an outburst, tackling Dolly with the utmost severity. Dolly gave him a very courteous explanation—to the effect that the Welbys with everybody else would see and be quite near to the royal party, but that actual rub-shouldering would be performed only by certain very great people.

"I consider myself and my family as good as anybody else," said Mr. Welby hotly.

Dolly said he thought so too. He added that Mr. Welby might have occupied a more prominent position at the ball as a member of the charity committee; but for that he would have had to pay more money.

"I paid all you asked—you never mentioned a word of such humiliating distinctions. You named the price, and I didn't attempt to beat you down, did I? I wrote the cheque and you pocketed it."

"For the charity," said Mr. Faring.

Then Mr. Welby said that had he known he would have acted differently, that he did not like and never had liked 'umbug, and that he had a very good mind not to go to the ball at all.

"Well," said Faring, courteously, "why not chuck it?

If it bores you, don't go. In buying the tickets you have done all that's really necessary. You have helped the charity."

"Oh, damn the charity."

"Fined!" said Hugo Blyth, roaring with laughter. "Penny in the slot for bad language, please."

"Hold your tongue, sir."

But Hugo, laughing more and more, presently calmed down Mr. Welby and got him back into what looked outwardly like a good temper. He said that of course Mr. Welby must go to the dance, being at heart nothing but a big tomboy and loving a romp as much as the youngest of them. Besides, since he had chosen dresses for his two pretty daughters, he must see them worn.

Violet had been tortured by her father's lapse from fashionable manners and the gross disrespect that he had shown to Dolly. So that in spite of Hugo's merriment the meal had a heavy, sombre ending. Coffee and liqueurs were served at table, and Mr. Welby drank and smoked in silence.

"Like a bear with a sore head," said the respectful butler, speaking of him to the footman out in the hall.

Edward the footman had just been to the lobby and had taken in a small parcel brought by a special messenger. Timesman put it on a side table after glancing at it.

"I hoped it was Prim's dress," she said; "what she's been fussing and 'phoning about all the afternoon. Little Prim will make a fine to-do when she hears it hasn't come"; and he smiled indulgently. "What a prize packet of impudence she is! Mind you, in a way

the little minx gets me. Anyhow, she's better than Vi. That Violet is just a lump."

"Oh, I like Violet best of the two," said Edward, yawning uncouthly, as he went through the baize door leading to the servants' quarters.

Almost immediately Primrose and Mr. Blyth came rushing into the hall. She dashed across to the table on which stood the telephone instrument, and snatched at the receiver.

"Oh, what demons," she cried wildly, "what utter fiends those Coulisses are! They swore by all their gods that it would be here before nine o'clock. Blast them, I've forgotten their number"; and she banged her disengaged hand upon the table. "Hugo, you rotter, come here. Quick! The telephone book. Coulissee, Madame and Company. Find the number."

"I beg your pardon," interposed Timesman, very gravely and respectfully. "Did you say Madame Coulissee?"

"Yes, yes."

"There's a small parcel come from them."

"Where is it?"

"Here, Miss."

Primrose had sprung away from the telephone, and snatching the parcel from Timesman's hand she laughed ecstatically.

"Yes, that's it. Thank you, Timesman. All right."

"Thank you, miss," and Timesman withdrew through the baize door.

Primrose sat on the edge of the table, swinging her legs, clutching the cardboard box to her bosom, and giggling.

"Hugo, shall I tell you a secret? I don't intend to be seen as a soppy flower girl just to please daddy. I shall burst upon them as a water nymph. A naiad. A jolly little naiad out of a babbling brook. What I'm going to wear to-night is in here."

"What, all of it?"

Primrose nodded her head and laughed audaciously.

"Then you aren't going to wear much."

"It isn't much, above the waist—and it's nothing at all below the waist."

"Nothing?" cried Hugo, enraptured. "Ha-ha-ha. But you can't really mean that. Oh, what *do* you mean?"

"I mean tights," said Primrose. "Zut!"

The others were coming from the dining-room; she sprang off the table, and danced away to her room, to hide her secret there till it should be wanted.

"My word, how hot it is," said Mr. Welby. "That's the worst of a flat. You never seem to get proper ventilation," and he looked round for Timesman, intending to tell him to bring the old brandy into the hall.

"Not to-night," whispered Mrs. Welby, divining his intention. "I do want you to be all there and quite at your best for the dance. Remember your solemn promise."

Mr. Welby grunted, but acquiesced. Then he sat puffing and blowing in one leather arm-chair, and Mrs. Welby sat tittering in another.

Meanwhile the young people were faced with an awkward problem. It was only half-past nine o'clock, and they had to kill time somehow for another hour at

least before beginning to dress for the carnival. For a few moments they were dreadfully troubled. What the dickens *should* they do?

"Why, the darts, of course," cried Hugo Blyth, saving the situation.

"Yes, yes, the darts! Of course. How stupid of us not to think of them," and they all rushed off to the drawing-room.

These darts were a delightful new game recently purchased by Primrose and Hugo. You set up your target against the back of a sofa, on the mantelpiece, or anywhere; you wound up your mechanical gun—and fizz-bang, away fled the dart, and you shrieked with laughter whether you hit the mark or missed it. Sometimes the dart flew so absurdly wide and made such boomerang curves, that the players had to jump and dodge frantically to avoid empalement. Soon the noisy charming game was in full swing.

Amabel said she did not want to play, so they used her to increase the noise by working the gramophone. She stood at this almost indispensable instrument, putting in the records one after another, and all the while watching the door through which Jack did not come. Her face grew paler and her heart heavier with each new rattling tune.

So they went on. From the hall one heard the buzzing music, the continuous thud of the gun, the shrieks of laughter, and every now and then the crash of an overturned chair.

"What's that?" said Mr. Welby, on the sound of broken glass. "They aren't shooting at the ornaments, are they?"

"Oh, surely not," said Mrs. Welby.

"That little beggar 'Ugo wouldn't scruple. Go and see. Stop 'em if they're up to real mischief."

But Mrs. Welby begged that they might not be interfered with; she said it seemed such a pity to stop them when they were so innocently happy.

"Oh, all right. Have it your own way," said Mr. Welby, with another grunt. Then after a silence: "Mother. D'you really think another drop of brandy would do me any harm?"

"Yes, dear, I do really."

"I feel to want it."

"Try not to think of it. Here, read the newspaper."

"No. I need something more stimulating than the newspaper. I feel tired—more than usual—to-night. . . . Now what is it?"

Across the hall, behind his back, the footman had gone to the outer door, and Timesman anxiously followed. Next moment a respectably-dressed woman of the middle classes pushed her way into the hall.

"Miss Brown, this really won't do," said Timesman, appalled by her audacity. "Mr. Welby can't possibly see you. They're going to a fancy-dress ball."

"Oh, nonsense!" said Sarah. "Of course he'll see me—fancy ball or not. I tell you I shall be more than welcome to-night," and she slapped her hand-bag proudly. "Ah, there you are, sir! Good evening, sir."

Mr. Welby rose from his chair, and, ignoring the old friend and servant, he spoke angrily to Timesman.

"What were my orders—my repeated orders? I told you to admit no one at all—when that clerk from Mr. Rolls came here before dinner."

"I know, sir," said Timesman, moving his hands as if greatly distressed.

"It's your business to get my wishes obeyed."

"I know, sir," and Timesman retired, as if in deep misery.

"Now, Sarah, what is the meaning of this intrusion?"

"Just this," said Sarah, opening the hand-bag and bringing out an envelope. "All that interest on the mortgage. I've brought it before the time. You were so kind as to give me till the half quarter. That's the eighth August, and to-day's only twenty-seventh July."

She spoke in pride, and in full confidence also, that at sight of the envelope, heavy and bulging with coin of the realm, Mr. Welby's satisfaction would be as great as her own. Poor soul, the envelope represented such hard work, so much scraping and saving, that naturally it seemed to her something important. But to Mr. Welby it was of course a very trifling affair.

"Why didn't you leave it at Mr. Rolls's?" he said, carelessly putting the envelope aside. "You needn't have brought it to me."

"I wanted you to have the pleasure and surprise as soon as possible," said Sarah. "I only made up the amount this afternoon."

"Well, well."

Sarah stood looking at her late master and mistress, and smiled at them affectionately; then she asked permission to sit down for a minute.

"In my excitement I wouldn't wait for your lift, ma'am. I came up two at a time, and it's given me the stitch. Now, sir, here's something you'll be glad to hear," and she nodded and smiled at him. "It's a hard struggle I'm having, but I do believe I'm going

to turn the corner. Yes, I do. Mind you, I'm risking a great deal; but it's the only way."

Then she explained that, seeing plainly how her establishment could never succeed without more sleeping accommodation, she was about to secure the two houses on the other side of their old home. By a lucky chance they had fallen vacant, and taking her courage in both hands she jumped at them. They would give her enough beds to make a big thing of it all.

Mr. and Mrs. Welby showed languid interest in Sarah's plots, but when she begged to hear about the ball "of which the man-servant had spoken," they talked to her with more animation, explaining that it would indeed be a very splendid assembly, with the highest in the land present. Sarah was slow to comprehend why the guests should masquerade in characters other than their own. Finally, however, it was made clear.

"And the young ladies—my two dears—how will they go, like?"

Mrs. Welby said the young ladies would go as two flower-girls, each carrying a tray of their name flowers—Violets and Primroses.

"Oh, *what* a pretty idea!" said Sarah, enchanted. "Whose idea was that now?"

"It was my idea," said Mr. Welby, mollified by the compliment. "Entirely my idea."

"Oh, they *will* be admired. And what are you, ma'am?" Mrs. Welby said she was going as Madame de Pompadour—"The favourite of a French king."

"Well, what next?" said Sarah, with sympathetic delight. "But *I* think you ought to go as Mr. Welby's favourite. Yes, I do," and she laughed cheerfully. "And what may you be, sir?"

"A mandarin."

"What's that, sir?"

"A Chinese statesman—and a philosopher."

"Ah, that's what I've heard you mention in the old days! You'll be all at home in that, sir."

Then Sarah sprang up from her chair. For, with momentary increase of noise, the drawing-room door had been opened and shut. Amabel Price came disconsolately into the hall.

"Well, upon my word, if it isn't dear Miss Amabel. This is a pleasant sight to my eyes," and Sarah offered an enthusiastic greeting. "We've bin talking of the wonderful dresses. What's yours, miss?"

"I—I'm not going to the ball," said Amabel.

"No," said Mrs. Welby, beginning to titter, "Miss Price does not accompany us."

"Aren't you well?" said Sarah, examining Amabel solicitously. "Oh, you *do* look tired and ill!"

"Yes," said Mrs. Welby. "Wouldn't you like to go home—dear? It's getting rather late."

"No, I'd like to stay a little longer, if you don't mind," said Amabel tremulously. "I—I want to see Jack. He—he asked me to wait. I thought perhaps he had returned."

And she went back to the drawing-room and the dart-players.

"Master Jack!" said Sarah. "You've given me no news of him. Is he for the ball, too?"

Yes, Mrs. Welby said, Jack was going to the ball as a sort of Pierrot. "But you wouldn't know what that means, perhaps. A kind of harlequin."

"I see. Will he have to black his face for that, ma'am?"

"No, nor to whiten it either. No, he is too good-looking to spoil himself by make-up."

"So he is," said Sarah cordially. "Good-night, ma'am. I can find my way out. Good-night, sir—and do please wish me luck in what I'm venturing."

"Good luck, Sarah," said Mr. Welby, with a yawn.

Jack had returned at last. Too late for a regular meal, he fortified himself with some biscuits and a whisky-and-soda in the dining-room. There his sister Violet came to him, and spoke in a low impressive voice.

"Two hours ago Irene wanted to speak to you on the telephone."

"Oh, did she?"

"Jack, don't answer as if it's nothing at all," said Violet, even more impressively. "I warn you that everything is now hanging in the balance between you and Irene."

"Indeed! How interesting."

"Listen. I answered the call, and she spoke to me."

"Yes?"

"Thinking it was *you*. Before I could stop her she had betrayed her feelings completely."

"Well what about it?"

"She is going to ring you up at your usual hour—eleven o'clock—and she says it will be the last time unless you give her the answer she expects. So now, there you are. I do implore you, Jack, to stop playing the fool with her. Do the right thing—as mother says—for all our sakes. Don't be cowardly about Amabel. Make her understand. Tell her plainly anything else is impossible. Then she'll understand."

"That's enough of it."

"Yes, I've said my say. I must go back to the drawing-room. Dolly will be wondering. Father was odiously rude to him at dinner."

Jack stood for a long time alone by the grand oak buffet. He was afraid to go into the other room and face Amabel.

But the time had now come for his quiet talk with her. Dolly and Hugo had gone; the family were in their rooms attiring themselves.

"Mab, old thing," he said endeavouring to speak lightly. "Sit down here and make yourself comfy." He had found her putting on her hat and scarf in the hall, and he pushed one of the leather chairs towards her.

She stood looking at him and did not speak.

"First, let me apologize," he said, "for not being home earlier. I did say I might be late, didn't I? Mab dear, you mustn't chip at me about it. It wasn't my fault—on my honour."

"On your honour?" said Amabel, coming close to him and looking in his eyes. "But have you any honour? That was the question I was going to ask you. Only now I don't think it's worth while."

She was white and trembling, yet she had spoken with a force that startled him. He had never seen her look like this.

"Of course," he said, "if you mean to take that sort of tone, you'll make things very difficult to discuss. You said yourself you wished us to go into the position." Then he took her by the waist and gently

forced her to sit in the low chair, he himself sitting on an arm of it.

"Mab dear, you must believe this, whatever else you think. I am as fond of you as I ever was. Every bit." And, stooping, he kissed her.

"Oh, Jack! Oh, Jack!" and she burst into tears. "If you are fond of me, then why are you so cruel to me?"

"I'm not—that is, I don't want to be. Mab, stop crying. This emotion tears me to pieces—I can't stand it. My nerves are all broken, as it is. Mab, be quiet—don't make a scene of it."

"Jack, do you see this?" she said sobbingly, and she showed him the engagement ring on her finger. "Do you remember when you gave it to me—in Battersea Park? We were walking along by the wall—by the river—and I was watching the water—all dark and cruel—and I thought then that if you ever failed me I would commit suicide."

"Mab, you mustn't say such dreadful things." He was scared by the intenseness of her words.

"No, I know. It was a wicked thought. But *are* you going to fail me?"

"Of course not—that is, not by ceasing to care about you."

"Remember, I have staked all on my love for you."

"You're an angel, Mab—you always were. And I'm the most miserable creature on earth when I'm not making you happy. And I haven't made you happy. I know that very well, of course." He floundered and hesitated; then got up, walked across the hall, and returned to her.

come off. I can't get it off. It's burning my flesh—marking it with my disgrace.”

She was weak and limp, sobbing and shaking now. Jack feebly sought to console her.

“Mab, I'm sorry, dreadfully sorry. Yes, I'm ashamed of myself.”

“Not as much as I am—for trusting you.”

“No, you mustn't talk like that. Don't make it too hard for me. I'm at my wits' ends. Keep your ring.”

“No, no!”

“Yes, keep it till to-morrow, anyhow. Give me till to-morrow to think things over.”

Presently she got up, dried her eyes, and moved towards the lobby.

“I had better go,” she said, without looking at him.

“Yes, you'd better go now. But, Amabel, I must see you to-morrow.”

“No, this is good-bye.”

“It can't be—no, it shan't be. Mab, be kind—make allowances for me—give me a chance to justify myself,” and he followed her, trying to detain her. “At least say what you yourself propose to do.”

“What do I propose to do?” She had turned. “I can't say. Look in the newspapers during the next few days and see if a woman has been found drowned. If not, you'll know that I have accepted the inevitable and settled down quietly.”

Her manner, as she quoted his own words, as well as the substance of what she said before them, scared him so much that he spoke in piteous entreaty.

“Amabel, don't try to frighten me by saying such terrible things. Although I know you wouldn't for a moment contemplate anything so wicked and awful,

still I can't let you go while you talk in such a way."

"Don't be afraid on my account," she said; "and don't be anxious on your own. I promise not to molest or pester you."

"Amabel, listen. Nothing is decided yet. Give me till to-morrow, as I ask. All this has worn me out. I love you—I swear it."

She went through the lobby and he followed, pleading with her.

"Till to-morrow, Mab. This time to-morrow. Yes, we'll spend the evening together—and the afternoon too."

Without answering, she went swiftly past the lift, and at the top of the vast staircase he clutched at her arm and held her.

"Promise me that you won't do anything wild or reckless. Mab, my dear girl, have some pity on me. Promise me. Promise me that if you ever felt desperate you'd warn me and give me a chance——"

She shook herself free and went slowly down the stairs.

"Amabel," he called in a low shaky voice, "this is not good-bye. Only till to-morrow."

He stood looking down the well of the staircase till she disappeared. She had not said another word; she had not once looked up at him.

He went back to the flat, wiping drops of perspiration from his forehead, and sat alone in the hall wrestling with himself.

What was he to do? He loved Amabel, and yet it seemed that he loved the world better. As he sat there haggard, staring, it was as though the invisible

forces of good and evil were fighting for possession of him.

Which was it to be—love or money? Perhaps the die had already been cast, perhaps the choice had already gone from him for ever. For a few moments he felt a cowardly relief of mind in thinking that this was so. After that dreadful interview Amabel would never forgive him; he had wounded her too cruelly; she would be obdurate in the just indignation he had aroused in that hitherto gentle breast, and no prayers or tears of his could soften her. She would repulse him if he grovelled on his knees, kissing the hem of her dress, imploring forgiveness.

But no. He could not thus deceive himself. He *knew* that she would forgive him. She was all love—the love that has no limits, that in exchange for love must pardon everything. If he went to her to-morrow and said those two words only, “Forgive me,” she would not even make him kneel.

He changed his position in the chair, and wiped his forehead again; he was thinking now of the wild desperate impossible thing that she had twice said to him. Yes, twice she had spoken of suicide. Her threats shook him, filled him with a superstitious unreasoning horror; and yet he was absolutely certain that no one on earth could be less likely to carry such threats into effect. She was too good, too brave. Indeed she herself had said at once it was a wicked thought. Only the mere uttering of such words gave painful proof of her trouble of mind at the moment.

He sat quite still, thinking, but feeling now emptied of emotion, worn out mentally.

Then the telephone rang, and he started. It was

as if Fate itself had called upon him to decide. Which was it to be—love or money? He did not stir from his chair.

After a brief silence the telephone bell rang again, and went on ringing. Still he sat motionless.

Then Timesman appeared. "The telephone, sir. Shall I?"

"Don't bother," said Jack, and he rose slowly, and went to the instrument himself. "Timesman, shut that door behind you."

"Yes, sir. May I remind you it is eleven o'clock? The car is ordered at eleven-forty, and Mr. Welby is nearly dressed. Your costume is laid out for you, all ready."

"All right. Shut that door, I tell you."

It was eleven o'clock; it was Irene, of course. It was Fate, using the voice of Irene to call him up and make him answer.

"Hullo?" he said quietly, with the receiver at his ear, and he looked round to make sure that he was now quite alone. "Yes, I know it's you. . . . Yes. . . . Yes, I say the answer is yes. . . . Glad you're pleased." And he looked over his shoulder again, furtively, guiltily, as if thinking that some invisible person had crept into the hall and was standing behind him. "Now, Irene, I've answered you, well, now you answer me. If you feel what you say, are you prepared to do a bolt, get married before the registrar, and go right away till all the fuss has blown over? . . . Very good. Then I'm your man." And there was a pause while he stood merely listening. "What's that?" And he forced himself to speak laughingly. "No, I promise not to flirt with anybody at the ball. . . . Yes, I'll

remember. . . . Just so." Once more he looked over his shoulder. "Yes, Irene, I belong to you now. . . . Quite right. Don't you let me forget it," and he laughed harshly. "Good-night. Pleasant dreams."

Then he went to put on his fancy dress. As Timesman said, it was all ready for him—black satin knickerbockers and silk stockings, white ruff, little skull cap, spangles and gold—such a rich and glittering costume as Folly personified might be proud to dance in.

CHAPTER VII

FOR twenty minutes the flat had been as quiet as if the whole family had gone to bed and were sleeping peacefully; then the commotion began.

Suddenly Timesman and Edward were confronted with still another importunate visitor, who, ignoring all protests, forced his entrance into the hall.

It was Mr. Rolls, the solicitor, with grave, troubled face and travel-stained garments, talking breathlessly but authoritatively.

"Tell your master to come to me at once, and by himself. I want to speak to him in private, and——"

Mr. Rolls did not continue, for at that moment there came a tremendous shouting from the corridor.

Mr. Rolls pulled out his eye-glass by the black ribbon, fixed the glass in his eye, and stared at the door from which the uproar issued. "Good gracious!" he said. "What is happening?"

What had happened so far was this. Mr. Welby had just received a great shock. Now completely garbed in the sumptuous robes of a Chinese mandarin, he stood outside his dressing-room, shaking the voluminous folds of rich silk, coloured cambric, and choice embroidery, adjusting the pigtails, preening himself, when suddenly Primrose, attired as a naiad, darted across the corridor from one room to another.

"Who? Why? What?" said Mr. Welby.

"A surprise for you," said Primrose impudently,

laughing at him from the threshold of her room. "Your idea was very nice, daddy—but this is my idea," and she capered, and lifted her bare arms with green weeds hanging from them.

Then it was that Mr. Welby gave his loud shout of anger.

He said he had never seen anything more immodest in his life. "No, I put my foot down. Certainly not," and he really bellowed at her. "Not for a moment will I allow it. Showing your legs!"

"Why shouldn't I?" said Primrose. "I'm not ashamed of them."

"Then you ought to be." He had seized her by the wrist and was dragging her along the corridor. "Where's your mother? I say, I'll not allow you to go to the ball like this."

"Father, don't be absurd," said Primrose, wriggling in his grasp. "Stop it. You're hurting me."

"I tell you, miss, you'll not go to the ball."

And he dragged her out into the hall, where Mr. Rolls stood waiting. Mr. Rolls was so much startled that the eye-glass fell from his eye. Truly they were an astounding pair—Mr. Welby, red-faced, enormous, in his rich tunic and wide sleeves; and Primrose, so small and active, agitating her little green legs and her naked shoulders as she writhed and twisted, struggling to free herself. And next moment Mrs. Welby with powdered wig, extended skirts, and a huge fan, came to join them, followed immediately by her elder daughter in a short bright violet skirt, with violet ribbons, a gold basket-work tray, and artificial flowers tumbling.

"Oh, dear, oh, dear!" cried Mrs. Welby. "Why

will you do things to make your father so angry—and without consulting anybody?"

"Not one word to me," said Violet angrily. "It is mean of her. She just wanted to cut me out. Oh, how mean, Prim!"

The preposterous group were so hotly engaged that they ignored Mr. Rolls, could not perhaps even see him.

"Daddy, are you cracked?" cried Primrose shrilly. "Mother, stop him. Pull him away."

"Father, don't be rough to her."

Mr. Welby released Primrose, and, turning to Mrs. Welby, bellowed at her.

"She'll not go to the ball."

Then at last Mr. Rolls secured their notice.

"Mr. Welby, I don't think any of you will go to the ball," he said gravely.

"What's this? Oh, you, Rolls? At this time o' night?"

"Yes, at this time of night. That is significant, is it not?" and Mr. Rolls made a solemn purposeful pause. "As I was saying—no, I fear you'll none of you have any heart for—ah—gaiety, after the news that it is my painful duty to break to you. . . . Mr. Welby, can you and I be alone?"

Timesman and Edward were sent away, but the others refused to leave the hall. Mr. Rolls had frightened them all; they stood round him, staring at him, and as he unfolded his tale of disaster they sat down one after another, as if literally their legs had been knocked from under them.

"I don't believe it." Mrs. Welby and her two daughters each said it in turn. "No, I can't, I won't believe it."

Yet they did believe it really. The dust on Mr. Rolls's clothes, the mournful nodding of his head, his gloomy voice, his sympathetic pauses—everything about him carried conviction to them.

"Stop," said Mr. Welby, with his hand on his forehead. "Give me time. Say all that again. I'm not taking it in."

Mr. Rolls sadly repeated the story. It was disaster—irremediable disaster. The imminence of war between Austria and Serbia had hastened the catastrophe; their sulphur mines had, so to speak, gone up in smoke; the wealth of their late cousin had vanished utterly. It had indeed been going very fast all this time, but the now defaulting manager, Mr. Bernstein, had concealed the true state of affairs as long as it was possible to do so.

"That Bernstein—what's that?" said Mr. Welby, in a thick dull voice. "But I trusted that fellow. He was the one I trusted, Bernstein was."

"Exactly," said Mr. Rolls. But, alas, the scoundrel was quite untrustworthy. His fraudulent deceptions and wicked practices must have already been in full swing during the lifetime of their late lamented relative, and one might now almost say, when one learned the true facts, that the whole splendid inheritance was nothing but a mockery or hollow sham.

"But you—you, Rolls—who was paid by me to look after that blackguard—what 'ave you been at?"

Mr. Rolls had done a great deal, as he explained, but unfortunately nothing that could now avert the crash. For a long time he had nourished suspicions; but these he had naturally not spoken of since they were only

suspicious. The moment that he had taken real alarm—and that was very soon after Bernstein ran away—he had himself gone to Vienna. Unfortunately he had not found the defaulter in Vienna, and had therefore come straight back to report to Mr. Welby. However, if he had unearthed Bernstein, it would not have made any difference to the regrettable facts. What more—he seemed to ask—could have been done by an eminently respectable solicitor of mature age, with fat cheeks, suave manners, and a black ribbon to his eye-glass?

But Mr. Welby was unable for a little while to take this view. He gave free vent to his passion, storming at Mr. Rolls, raving at him. He vowed that if the money had gone Mr. Rolls was as big a rascal as Bernstein. He swore that he would not allow either himself or his family to be cheated. He held Rolls responsible and would get the money back again, out of Rolls and all the other cheats.

Then he sat down again, and wept and brandished his arms in impotent grief and fury.

"Oh, it's too bad. It's too bad. It's too wicked."

"My dear Mr. Welby," said Rolls, himself visibly affected. "I think nothing of the strong terms you have employed. I simply wash them from my mind. Truly both you and your family have my deepest sympathy."

And indeed nothing could be more sad and pitiful. Violet, with her tray of flowers clutched upon her knees, sat shaking and glaring; Primrose contorted herself, whimpering; Mrs. Welby sobbed and laughed hysterically; while Mr. Rolls continued to murmur his sympathy.

Then after a little time, Mr. Welby pulled himself together and succeeded in bearing up against the disaster with real dignity.

"The blow falls heavy, Rolls—yes, it does; but it's the first force of it that stuns." As he spoke, he began to walk about the hall. "Mother, you and I must set the example. We mustn't give way. Violet—Primrose dear—we need our full strength. You must help us, my dears, not take our strength from us"; and he moved to and fro, glancing at the panelled walls, the carving, and the leather. "Things mayn't be quite so bad as they seem."

Mr. Rolls shook his head sadly.

"Suppose we are to drop back out of all this," Mr. Welby continued, with another glance at his splendid surroundings; "well, at the worst, we've 'ad our taste of it—we've enjoyed what it gave—we've learnt the experience." And as he went on he rose steadily to a great height. "Come. If we are to take this knock, let's face it." He had put aside his queer Chinese hat with the pigtail attached, and as he ran his hand through his grey hair he looked more than dignified, majestic. "If it's got to be, its got to be. There've been times this last month when I've *felt* the emptiness. Mother, *you've* felt it too. Prim, my dear child—Violet too—show your spirit. Mother, remember what you and I used to say. If one has enough, that's sufficient. Well, we're called to act up to it now. Let's do it without howling. All this that we're compelled to renounce, well, I say let it go; and we've got to drop back and be content with the old humdrum life."

"But at your age," said Mr. Rolls, admiringly and pityingly, "it is hard to begin life again."

"Fortunately I possess a competence of my own," said Mr. Welby, with great dignity; "so life isn't going to be harder than what we can bear."

"Mr. Welby, you don't yet understand."

"I have private means—I mean, quite apart from the money I came into. And I say, thank heaven that I *have* got it."

"My poor friend!" And with the utmost commiseration Mr. Rolls told him this was gone with the rest. By reason of Bernstein's machinations and his blind faith in that wretch, he had allowed his liabilities to become almost limitless.

"Stop," said Mr. Welby, beginning to tremble all over his big frame. "I'm speaking of my own little nest-egg, outside the mining business altogether. My savings. What I'd worked for and put by. They can't take that."

"They'll take your last penny," said Mr. Rolls mournfully. "They'll take everything, except the clothes you stand up in. I don't mean what you are wearing at this moment, but your ordinary clothes."

"Is that the law?"

"I fear so."

Then Mr. Welby gave way to tragic despair, raving, groaning, tearing at his philosopher's robe. Mrs. Welby gasped and sobbed; sounds of bitter woe and lamentation filled the flat.

While they were still bewailing, but a little less loudly, Jack came in as a gorgeous Pierrot; with the little skull cap set jauntily to the back of his head

and his spangles flashing like golden fire on the black satin. But he looked scared, and asked what had so distressed them all.

"Oh, Jack," said his mother, going to him. "Oh, my unhappy boy, summon all your courage. An appalling blow! Something too dreadful has occurred."

Jack staggered back from her, terror-stricken. If he had whitened his face with paint he could not have made it whiter, and it twitched spasmodically as he leaned against the panelled wall as though for support.

"Not—not Amabel!" he said in a whisper.

"We are ruined," cried Mrs. Welby, not even hearing what he had said.

"Paupers," said Mr. Welby. "Not a penny in the wide world. All gone—my own with the rest."

Jack sank into a chair and he buried his face in his hands. "Thank God," he murmured to himself. "Oh, thank God—not *that*." Under the deadly fear that his mother's first words had aroused, his heart had almost stopped beating. Even now, in the overwhelming relief at learning that the fear had been baseless, he felt sick and faint from the stress of it.

He sat there, taking no notice of the others, not knowing what was going on, while Mr. Welby gave orders to Timesman, sent the car away, and so forth.

They were all of them ruined. What did it matter? Amabel was alive and safe.

Then Timesman gave him a letter that had just been brought up by the porter. The envelope was addressed in Amabel's handwriting, and as Jack tore it open her engagement ring fell out and rolled across the parquet floor. Beyond the ring, the envelope con-

tained a sheet of note-paper with only one word on it. Only the one word—"Good-bye."

And the fear returned to him, modified but as deadly, making him leap to his feet, sweeping him through the hall and out into the lobby. If she had not done it yet, she was going to do it. This was what she meant by the ring and the word. This was her warning. He had prayed that, if she ever meant to do it, she should warn him first. She had warned him. She would do it, if he did not get to her and prevent her. She would do it now, in a minute's time, if all was not yet over.

The ring, the word! "Promise you'll warn me." A hat, a coat! He was half mad with fear as he seized one of his father's Homberg hats and crushed it down on the black skull cap. Snatching wildly at a pile of garments on a side table, he pulled away one of Mr. Welby's light grey over-coats to cover his black silk and gold spangles. Then he dashed down the staircase, flight after flight, and out of the building.

Without even stopping it, he sprang into a taxicab and told the man to drive like hell to Battersea Park.

Panic fear possessed him, and yet all his thoughts seemed to him absolutely clear and logical. Remembering what she had said about Battersea Park, he felt certain that it was there and nowhere else that she would go. She would walk along that path by the water, to the spot where she had thought of suicide at the moment when he put the ring on her finger; and in imagination he could see her painfully clambering over the low iron rails, standing for a moment on the wall, and then, perhaps with his name on her lips,

letting herself drop into "the dark cruel water." "Oh, Jack!" The name of her murderer—for it would be he who had killed her, as surely as if he had thrown her into the water himself.

"Faster," he shouted frantically to the man; "drive faster." The cab was spinning through Lower Sloane Street, and Jack with head and shoulders out of the window peered at each woman's figure that they passed. "Get on. Go faster."

"If I go any faster," grumbled the driver, "I shall get run in or there'll be an accident; then we shan't get there at all." The driver was not pleased with this fare, in spite of the gentleman's promise of gold.

"Get on, I tell you."

They had reached the bridge now, and Jack held the cab door open. He could see the trees of the park, sombre masses of foliage, and lamplight on the water as it lapped against the stone wall. And again he saw her in imagination. She had just entered the park, she was moving swiftly away from him along the path. Oh, if he could only be in time.

He was frenzied, like a madman, and yet all the while he was really coming to his senses. He knew right from wrong now. He understood for the first time the stupidity as well as the baseness of his recent conduct. It was at once a hot unreasoning agony and a deadly cold awakening for Jack. He felt like a somnambulist who wakes and learns of crimes that he has committed in his sleep. All the money and the longing for money seemed now nothing, or rather a confused part of the ugly dream that was ending with these horrible realities.

Thus he felt now in his great love and dread. If

only it was not too late. Nothing on earth mattered but Amabel. If only he could find her alive, hold her safe in his arms, he would work for her, die for her, never let her go.

He left the cab at the far end of the bridge while it was still moving, and rushed down to the park gates.

The park gates were shut, of course. The park is closed every night. He had not thought of this. But Amabel, he told himself, would not have thought of it either. Darting to and fro, he made sure that there was not any small side gate still open, or even an aperture anywhere large enough to permit of Amabel's getting through. No. Then the thought came to him that Amabel, frustrated in her original intention, might throw herself from the bridge itself. Perhaps he had passed her unobserved on the bridge a minute ago; she might well have been there, hidden from him by the huge structures that carried the suspension chains, or lurking in some dark shadow.

He ran back to the bridge, and searched hither and thither; stopping to gaze at the sinister flood, dodging behind slow-moving wagons, and in front of swiftly rattling omnibuses. And another thought presented itself. This traffic was sufficient to have driven her further, and there were too many pedestrians about—too much lamplight. She would have re-crossed the bridge, and gone down to the embankment; gone down to the solitude and obscurity of the embankment. That was it. She would go along the embankment, under the trees, past those dark houses, till she got to a spot opposite the point she had first aimed at. She would stand there looking across the river to the park—to where he had plighted his faith. And it would be

easier—no railings. She would slide over the smooth granite. Perhaps hang for a moment, and then, without a cry, be gone.

He ran off the bridge down to the embankment, and, facing Chelsea, explored its stretching length, stopping here and there to recover his breath, and stare over the parapet, shouting wild questions to the few loiterers that he encountered. No one answered him. People shuffled away as if afraid. He ran on, staring towards the lights of the other bridge, dreading every moment to come upon a crowd, to hear shouts, to see some sign of trouble. He thought now it was just as likely that she would have come to this other bridge as to the one he had left, for the bridges were about equally distant from that spot which had been drawing her. No. This bridge straight ahead of him was the one that she would go to. This one—Albert Bridge—was the one, because it was nearer to where she lived. Those lodgings in the side street!

He ran desperately till he reached the second bridge, and on it he behaved more and more like a madman. Throughout, his actions had been very unusual, and it was not therefore strange that the taxicab driver felt troubled in mind. He had deserted the cab without a word of explanation, but the cab followed him over the first bridge and all along the embankment. The cabman did not mean to let him out of his sight if he could help it, and he shouted now, as he came level again:

“Look here, sir, I can’t carry on like this. I don’t understand it. You pay me, please, and let me go.”

“No,” shouted Jack. “I shall want you again. Stay where you are. I will come back to you.”

"I ain't so sure of that," said the driver, and the cab followed Jack across the bridge and down to the other gates of the park.

Here a new thought had come to Jack. Trying to calculate time, he thought that perhaps he was ahead of Amabel, instead of behind her. She would go first of all to her lodgings; she would have her poor little arrangements to make—to tidy her room—to settle accounts with her landlady. His heart leaped with hope. He *was* ahead of her. He would go to her lodgings, and, please Heaven, find her there. He turned and ran again.

Then the cab driver shouted once more. "Hi! You stop." And he hastily turned his cab.

"What, are you there?" cried Jack. "Why the devil didn't you wait where I told you? I might have missed you."

"Yes, I think you might," growled the driver; and a ridiculous brain-inflaming altercation began. Jack wanted to get into the cab and drive like the wind to those lodgings at Chelsea; and the driver wanted to be paid before he undertook any more of it. The frenzy of Jack merely confirmed his suspicions.

"You pay me off. I've had enough of it."

"I'll give you a sovereign on account. Confound you!" said Jack, releasing the handle of the door in order to get at his money. He flung open his overcoat, and his hand dived towards a trousers pocket, which, unfortunately, did not exist. His hand merely lost itself in the loose silken folds of his Pierrot knickerbockers. He remembered then that he was in fancy dress, of course. He had not a penny about him.

"My goodness!" said the cabman, reversing his

engine, and backing away with the cab. The open coat had shown him in a flash Jack's gold spangles and white ruff.

"I'll pay you to-morrow," Jack was saying wildly. "I'll give you my address. I live at Knightsbridge. That is—I used to. Yes."

"You don't get into this cab," said the driver, skilfully spurting forward. "No, not unless it's for me to take you to the nearest police station," and he dodged Jack, making the cab spurt forward, and backing and dodging afterwards in a masterly fashion. "You come with me to the police."

"Damn you, I can't wait!" shouted Jack, and he started running across the bridge.

The cab followed him cautiously, and was just behind him when he reached the further shore. Here Jack jumped upon the footboard of a belated omnibus, which was going more or less in the right direction. Unluckily, the conductor told him to get inside or on top; but Jack could do neither, because he was searching the pavement with anxious eyes. The conductor was angry, and angrier still when, the 'bus swerving from the right direction, Jack leaped off the footboard without paying his fare. The conductor stopped the 'bus, and shouted after Jack indignantly, and the cab, which had followed the 'bus, swept by with its driver yelling unintelligible information. Jack ran up one street and down another. As he crossed King's Road and turned right-handed, the following cab nearly lost him. Jack ran on, his overcoat flying wide, his spangles shining. Near Chelsea Parish Church he turned left-handed, and saw a girl and a man standing outside a house not so very far ahead of

him. The taxicab was at least two hundred yards behind him. The driver had stopped, calling to a policeman, inviting him to get upon the step. The policeman did so, and the taxi came on at full speed.

On leaving the Knightsbridge flat Amabel walked slowly away, feeling mentally and physically exhausted. It was all over, then, she thought dully. In the game of life she had staked everything, and lost.

She thought of that other girl, the red-haired supercilious creature, who was her successful rival; and she thought of Jack's cruelty and wickedness. Of his cowardice too—saying that nothing was yet decided, craving for a further interview, imploring pity. Pity for *him*!

With these thoughts there mingled a sense of some duty of hers as yet unperformed. It was all over, but still there was something that she herself had to do in the matter. What was it?

The ring! Yes, of course. Half-way home she remembered, and going into a cheap restaurant where she sometimes took her scanty meals, she asked for an envelope and note-paper. In a dismal dark little washing-place, after bathing her hand in cold water and soaping it profusely, she struggled to pull off the ring. She succeeded at last.

Then she went back to Knightsbridge and gave her letter to the porter at the flat, begging him to take it up to Jack immediately.

Then she turned homeward again.

She had reached Chelsea and her own street when she came face to face with Mr. Lyme. He was hardy and truculent to-night. He said he had heard at her

lodgings that she was out and had been lying in wait for her since half-past ten, and now it was past twelve. He asked her what she meant by it. She wouldn't go out with him, oh, no, but she went out with other people—and stayed out, to these outrageous hours.

And walking along the street by her side, he pestered her more abominably than he had ever done. Then, as they stood by the lamp-post in front of the lodgings, the lamplight showed him her face and he understood that she was suffering from a distress greater than could possibly be inflicted by his importunities. Perhaps this made him think that the chance he longed for had come at last.

"Amabel," he said, with a rapid change of tone. "Amabel, I have suspected before; but now I know." He had taken possession of her hands, and he continued to speak tenderly. "Yes, I know everything—and I don't mind. Some brute of a man has been treating you badly. I'll make it up to you. Only trust me, and I'll make you forget. Trust me, and you shall never regret it."

"Let me go." Amabel was trying to escape to the steps of the house, and he was trying to clasp her in his arms.

"Don't go into that dingy hole, where you'll be miserable all by yourself," Lyme pleaded. "Come straight away—to an hotel. I'll get you lovely rooms. You can send for your things to-morrow. But of course I'll buy you beautiful new frocks—and hats—and all you fancy."

"Oh, let me go," said Amabel, struggling. "Let me go, or I'll cry for help"; and next moment she did indeed utter a faint cry.

"Hush," said Mr. Lyme, releasing her. "There's somebody coming."

Somebody was coming, at a run—a fantastic impossible figure. It was calling, "Amabel, Amabel"; it threw off its loose wrapper as it ran; it sprang into the lamplight, fierce and wild, all glittering.

Perhaps the strangeness, the incredibleness of its aspect really frightened Mr. Lyme. At any rate he put up no defence worth mentioning. Jack's first blow sent his silk hat flying, and the second knocked him down.

"You blackguard," he said, getting up; and Jack knocked him down again.

It all took place with lightning rapidity. Just as Mr. Lyme went down again the fatal taxi had arrived; and the policeman and the driver were both at Jack together. Jack struck the policeman, giving him a tremendous upper-cut, and the helmet flew as if it had been as light a thing as Mr. Lyme's topper.

But the fighters were surrounded. People had arisen out of the earth, loafers, tapsters, ostlers, what not, a mob. Jack was fighting against heavy odds. It looked like a football scrimmage, with the ground invaded by an unruly crowd; and the policeman, helmetless, bleeding, was like a maltreated referee as he strenuously blew his whistle.

Jack was soon overpowered, and borne away; shouting to Amabel while they dragged him along.

"Amabel, it's all right. He can't hurt you now. He'll go home to bed. I love you—my darling. No one else in the world. Don't be afraid—trust me—keep faith in me."

PART THREE

ADVERSITY



CHAPTER I

MORE than three years had passed. It was the winter of 1917-18, a dull cold day, and men standing outside a newly opened recruiting office in the north of London slapped their chests and shuffled their feet to keep themselves warm while they waited for admittance. A sergeant in uniform let them into the building six at a time; they were sent through a large bare room to a table where a pallid officer was seated with two or three civilians; and, if accepted, they were taken out through another door to be examined at once by a doctor.

"You understand, this is the Labour Corps," repeated the officer, again and again. "You'll be trained and sent out in battalions. You won't be called on to fight, but you'll be soldiers—regular soldiers, you know—subject to a soldier's discipline. You've been informed as to pay, allowances, and other conditions. Very good. Can you use a pick and shovel?"

"I did ought to," replied a sturdy block of a man in corduroy trousers. "I've used 'em for the last fifteen years."

"Capital," said the officer. "*You're* the sort we want." And the ex-navvy moved on a few steps to have his name written down by a civilian at the end of the table.

Behind him came an out-at-elbows clerk of nondescript appearance; behind the clerk came a sandy-bearded, blue-eyed, neatly dressed person; and behind

him again there was a big elderly man, in a woefully shabby shooting suit, who had already attracted some attention. The officer stared and two of the civilians grinningly nudged each other as this volunteer in his turn stood before the table. The sandy man in front of him had whispered that he ought to uncover, but, disregarding the advice, he stood there with his soiled and battered Homburg hat pulled low to his ears.

"Take off your hat," said the officer, as if disgusted by his bad manners; and the old fellow reluctantly obeyed, disclosing a shock of grey hair.

"Well, what do you want?" said the officer.

"I want to roll up with the others—to enlist in the battalions, and do my bit out there with the rest of them."

"Is this meant for a joke, or have you been drinking?"

"No, sir, certainly not. I'm a total abstainer."

"How old are you?"

"Forty-five."

"That's a silly sort of lie," said the officer, irritably. "Seventy-five?"

"No, sir, that would be a great exaggeration. Look at me, sir. I'm hale and hearty—solid all through"; and the old man pulled himself together, and stood very erect. "I can work as well as some of the young 'uns. I'm not afraid of work; only it's work that I can't find, try how I will."

"Oh, yes, we know that story."

"No, don't say that, sir. I'm not deceiving you"; and the old man pleaded eagerly. "Don't turn me down, sir. I *need* it. I've a wife and family. Don't

send me back to 'em empty again. Three years I've been strugglin', an' sinking all the time. Yet there's nothing I wouldn't do to earn an honest livelihood."

"That's enough. Pass on. Sergeant!"

"No, sir, do please hear me out. I've education, knowledge of business—held a responsible post thirty odd years in the city o' London. I've known prosperity too. This is the truth I'm telling you. I was a very rich man, for a little while, I was. But they took it from me, through no fault of my own. They took it to my last penny. They made me bankrupt, and my son too. Because of my business connections they took and interned me—they did indeed, sir; they shut me up in a prisoners' camp, and kept me there at the very moment when I might have been saving something out of the wreck of my affairs if allowed to attend to them. They treated me something shameful over the bankruptcy proceedings, and then turned me loose, to starve, for all they cared. And so I might have done, if not assisted by my own children."

"Sergeant. Clear him out."

"No, sir. I say the state oughtn't to abandon a man like this. My son is fighting for his country at this minute. His wife is serving as a nurse. My two daughters——"

But the officer would hear no more, and the poor old chap was bundled out of the building. As if not yet giving up hope, he hung about in the small courtyard where all the men were waiting; and here presently one of those civilian gentlemen who had been at the table came out and talked to him.

"I admire your spirit," said this gentleman, kindly

enough; "but you must see yourself it is impossible. We are bound by the age limit, which, goodness knows, is high enough."

Then the old chap, touched by the gentleman's kind tone, spoke with emotion. "Get 'em to stretch a point. I'm not an ordinary case. You see in me, sir, a man who has been worse treated by the laws of this country—yes, worse, I do believe—than any man that ever lived. I'd like to tell you the history of my family"; and he went on with a rambling account of how he had valid claims against the government, of how he must certainly be compensated if the true facts were known, and of how disgracefully his solicitor had let him down. "But it's not going to rest there," he said in conclusion. "If I can only keep my head above water, I'll take it to the steps of the throne before I've done."

The kindly gentleman, tired of the conversation, hurried away, with some vaguely polite formula, such as, "I fear it's not in my power to be of substantial assistance. I should advise you to go to one of the charitable organizations."

"But I have my pride," the old man called after him, loudly and indignantly. "It's employment I ask for, not charity."

Then somebody else spoke to him. It was the sandy blue-eyed man who had advised him to remove his hat; this fortunate person had been accepted.

"Look here," he said, "I heard all what you told 'em inside, and I read it up as a dirty shame the way you've been treated—shoving you in a camp with enemies. What's your name?"

"Welby."

"Welby! That don't sound German."

"No, I'm British to the backbone," said Mr. Welby, stoutly. "It was just the devil's luck that muddled me up with a pack of rascally Austrians at the time the war broke out."

"Well, my name's Tom Chance. I'm a widower, but I've had a wife and fam'ly in my time. Now answer me one question. Can you drive a horse and cart?"

"Yes, I can," said Mr. Welby, with eagerness. "I'm a very good whip."

"Then you come along with me, Welby, old boy."

And as they walked away together Mr. Welby's new acquaintance explained that he was in the employment of a greengrocer, as carman, and he saw no reason why Mr. Welby should not step into the job that he now vacated by becoming a soldier.

"Chance, my dear fellow," said Mr. Welby, "I'll be grateful as long as I live if you can do this for me."

"Somebody's got to get the job," said Chance, "and it'd best be one as really wants it. The gov'nor don't know I'm goin' yet"; and Chance tapped his nose and laughed cheerfully. "When I break the news to him I may as well name my successor at the same time." Then he further explained that he had joined the army because he felt a kind of call to get as near to the sound of the guns as he could. Also the sight of all the sleek smug young men who had shirked their duty so disgusted him that he would be glad to get out of London anyhow. As he said this, he stopped walking and spat upon the pavement. "So it's khaki for Tom Chance at any price. I'm not a chicken, as you can see—though I ain't as old as you, old cock." And he laughed again. "Forty-five! That was a real good 'un you slung up to 'em. It was that what made me

take to you. Now come in here and have a drink. Then we'll get on with it."

Mr. Welby hesitated, fearful of offending this friend in need; but he said at last that he would not drink himself, although he would watch with pleasure Mr. Chance drinking.

"Eh, but that's dull work. Change your mind. A spot?"

"Much obliged. I don't feel to want it," said Mr. Welby. "And to be frank, I promised my missis never to begin that game again. I had my reasons."

"I see," said Chance. "And I don't know that I want anything myself. We'll keep moving."

"Is it near, where we're going?" asked Mr. Welby, as they walked on.

"No, miles away, right across London. Brixton Hill."

Mr. Welby winced. Brixton Hill was sufficiently near the neighbourhood where he had so long resided in peace and comfort to arouse painful memories. But no matter.

They went there by train, and during the journey Tom Chance offered some scraps of useful information about Root the greengrocer.

"He's a cruel pincher—what I call a vindictive man, if you give him his way. The cost of living and rise of food is nothing to him, except when he can make his profit out of it. He won't give you more than the bare thirty bob a week."

"It's as much as I expected," said Mr. Welby. "I can do on it, and I'll tell you why. I have two good daughters, and they're doing well—they've done well, all along, bless their hearts. One pound a week they've

given their mother and me ever since they were forced to turn to and work for their living."

Then, till they reached their destination, he continued to talk about his family.

His two girls, he said, had been able to save something when the crash came; they were allowed to keep their personal property, ornaments, wearing apparel, musical instruments; and all of this they possessed still, carefully stored at a depository, ready to bring out and enjoy on the advent of better days.

"Chance, I tell them never to part with any of it, even if it's mere finery. I tell 'em they're sure to want it one day. Do you follow me, Chance? I say all that for a purpose—the purpose of keeping up their *hope*. It's a duty to keep up the hopes of one's family as well as one's own hopes. For without hope, where are we? I maintain that when a man abandons hope, well, that's the *real* bankruptcy. So to speak, he's put up the shutters with his own hands, filed his own petition, and declared his mental assets as nil."

"Did you get that out of a book?"

"No. It was merely my personal reflections," said Mr. Welby, perceptibly gratified. "The more you think, the more you see; and the older you grow, the more occasion you have for thinking. There's one thing I see now very clearly, and that is: if you make a mistake, don't pretend you haven't made one. I made a mistake when I quarrelled with my son, and I'm grateful to providence that his mother forced me to patch it up with him. I tell you, Chance, if that boy had been killed while the bad blood subsisted, I'd 'ave never got over it"; and Mr. Welby passed the back of his hand across his eyes and coughed.

"Why did you quarrel with him?"

"It was like this. At the period of our misfortunes he had the opportunity of marrying a very wealthy young woman, and the view I took was that he ought to have done it—and thereby come to the rescue of his family and put them on their legs again. *He* took the opposite view and refused—telling his mother it was beneath him, saying it would be mean and degraded."

"Ah! Well, I do seem to catch his argument. I myself have never had much respect for a fellow that lives on his wife's money; and when it comes to all his relations living on it too, well, it do seem a bit hot, don't it?"

"Yes, Chance, I was wrong. I told you that I now see I was wrong. The more so, because there was a complication in my lad's plans. This rich girl was in love with him, but he was in love with a poor girl. And that was the one he married—the poor one."

"A bit of a sportsman, your son!"

"Too much so—but that's another story. Let bygones be bygones. As I was saying, directly he came out of prison——"

"Out o' prison? What had he been in prison for?"

"He'd got himself into some silly scrape with the police. To this day I don't know the rights of it. But I'll say, I know sure enough he was more sinned against than sinning. I couldn't help him, *I* was caged; the fine wasn't forthcoming—so they put him away, for a month. When he got out the war was raging; and he married and enlisted on the same morning. Now, here, Chance, is another reflection—another little bit o' my philoso——"

"Yes, but you must save that bit, Welby; for this is our station."

As they approached the greengrocer's shop, Chance gave final instructions.

"Not a word to Mr. Root about having seen better days and fallen in the world—that'd only frighten him and put him off. Don't you talk too much. Leave it to me."

Thanks to Chance, Mr. Welby obtained the job. Root, a horrid grubby little man, with a huge fat wife almost three times his size, hummed and hawed, but in truth was well pleased to secure a substitute for the man he was losing. Men nowadays, both in the front line and at this great distance behind it, were becoming more and more scarce.

"But what about his character?" said Mrs. Root, asthmatically and fretfully. "Does he bring good references?"

Mr. Welby was going to speak, but Chance spoke for him.

"I give myself as his references," said Chance. "And I certify to his character."

"You do, do you?" said Mrs. Root, breathing hard. "But how long have you known this man Welby?"

"Many and many a year have I known this man Welby," said Chance, with great firmness. "And I know him to be honest and straightforward—a good driver, accustomed to horses, free from the drink habit." And turning for a moment with his back to Mr. and Mrs. Root, he gave Mr. Welby a prodigious wink. Then he turned again to his late employer.

"He can take over my room at the mews, and begin his work to-morrow. He is now living up north. And what you best do, Mr. Root, is to give him the loan of the van to fetch his missus and his few bits of sticks."

"Oh, that be blowed for a tale," said Mr. Root. "It's no business of mine how he moves his traps."

"Come, come," said Chance firmly. "Fair's fair. At the screw what you're paying him you may as well be just, for you certainly aren't generous. What's more—you'd better let him have fifteen bob on account of his week's pay. It stands to reason in these times a man can't finance himself ahead."

Mr. Root protested, Mrs. Root nearly suffocated, but these severe terms were finally accepted, and, as Chance led Mr. Welby around to the mews, he whistled and laughed gaily. He was pleased with himself. "When you're doing a thing," he said modestly, "you may as well carry it through in proper form."

Mr. Welby stopped, grasped his hand, and spoke with husky but intense gratitude.

"Chance, my dear fellow, you overwhelm me. I'll never forget it—not to my dying day."

"That's all right," said Chance, and he took Mr. Welby into the snug little mews, introduced him to the horse and the cart, and set him to do a turn of work while he himself began his packing.

"What am I to call the horse?" said Mr. Welby, in his shirt sleeves, looking out of the stable door presently. "I mean, what's his name?"

"I call him Diomed," shouted Chance, from his room upstairs. "I don't suppose that's his real name. Dessay he's had a many names in his time. I chris-

tened him that after the King's horse. You know, the one that won the big race."

The horse was not unlike Mr. Manger's famous brown hackney, although considerably older, and the greengrocer's light van would no doubt drive as easily as Mr. Manger's T-cart.

"So-ho, Diomed," said Mr. Welby, as he clumsily groomed the animal. "Steady now—quiet, my boy. Steady." He gave his admonitions because he thought they were professional and businesslike, not because the horse was showing any disposition towards excitement. Indeed the sober tranquil Diomed watched him with a lack-lustre eye, as if surprised by, but willingly tolerating, all these strange attentions. "Steady then. S-s-s. S-s-s"; and Mr. Welby made the hissing noise to which he had often listened when helpers made it in Mr. Manger's yard, while scraping and brushing their beasts. Having finished the toilet of Diomed, he put the harness on for practice; hung it up again for practice. Then he got the bucket and a short ravelled piece of hose, and he washed the wheels of the van.

"I care for nobody, no, not I!
And nobody cares for me . . ."

Mr. Welby sang at his work. His hands were half frozen, the perspiration was pouring off his broad face; his back ached from stooping; but, although perhaps he did not know it, he was thoroughly happy.

It was late when he got back to the block of workmen's dwellings at which for some months he had resided.

In the little front room he found his wife and elder daughter, and on the sound of his voice Primrose came

out of the tiny back room. They had been waiting supper for him.

"You've good news," said Mrs. Welby. "I can see it in your face."

"Perhaps you've guessed right," he said jovially. "But first, let's have our food. What are you going to give us to-night, mother?"

"Well, there's the remains of the cheese for you. Just enough for one. The girls and I aren't hungry—so we shouldn't touch it, however much there was."

"No," said Violet.

"We both had our solid meal in the middle of the day," said Primrose.

"Oh, had you?" said Mr. Welby. "Then you're going to have something tasty at the end of it. Look here." With a triumphant air he laid a small packet on the table. "I've brought you some sausages."

"Sausages," echoed Mrs. Welby. "Not *pork*?"

"Now, mother, none o' your cross-questioning. Never you mind what they're made of. There, shove 'em in the frying-pan."

Very soon the six thin sausages were sizzling in the pan and adding their odour to the rather stuffy atmosphere; the fire crackled with some wood that Mrs. Welby had received as a present from a neighbour; the two girls, helping their mother, boiled the water and made the tea. Both together they folded and put away some pieces of needle-work that littered the bed. Then they put the chair at the table for their mother, and the packing-case for Mr. Welby.

"But, father," said Mrs. Welby, looking round from the stove, "you have some better news for us than these sausages. I know you had."

Mr. Welby chuckled. "I wanted to save it up. But I mustn't keep you in suspense. *I've got a job.*"

"Oh, father, how splendid of you," cried Primrose, gaily, "how truly splendid!"

"Hearty congrats," said Violet.

Mrs. Welby, leaving her task for a moment, gave him an enthusiastic hug.

Then soon supper was ready and they took their places, Violet and Primrose sitting on the edge of the bed.

"Father," said Primrose, as he began to distribute the six sausages, "if you think I can eat one and a half, you're very much off the line."

"Nor I either," said Violet. "One is the uttermost I can tackle. No, *please*, father. Then there'll be two apiece for you and mother."

"My dear child," said Mrs. Welby, "I'm not an ogress. One for me, father. Take two yourself—and we can talk about the odd one later."

For a moment Mr. Welby hesitated; then he acted with decision. "Now no nonsense. One and a half each is fair arithmetic. Mother . . . Vi . . . Prim"; and he handed the plates.

He himself had eaten nothing all day; and if, as they said, the ladies had already enjoyed a solid meal, they showed a sharp appetite. The sausages vanished in what seemed the silence of a moment; the large piece of brownish war bread swiftly grew small.

"Now you're just going to finish off that bit of cheese," said Mrs. Welby, in an authoritative tone.

"Shall I?" said Mr. Welby, again hesitating. But this time he gave way to pressure. "Well, if you insist—only I wish you'd all join."

After the cheese Mr. Welby lit his pipe, and they remained seated at the table while he talked to them.

"Listen," he said, with a chuckle. "What d'you think I done this morning? I don't mind confessing I've felt fairly desperate these last days. I wouldn't tell you, mother, because I knew you'd make a fine how-d'ye-do. • But here's the plain truth. I went and offered myself as a soldier."

"No?" said Mrs. Welby, leaning back in her chair, aghast. "Oh, no, don't say that. Don't say you ever had such a wicked thought as to desert us."

"Wicked thought! Desert you! It was the *pay* I was after. The pay in these new corps is tremendous; and, as everything is found, I could have sent it all home. Anyhow, they wouldn't have me."

"It was very very wrong of you," said Mrs. Welby.

"No, mother," said Primrose, with her eyes glowing; "It was grand of him. Oh, you poor old dear—you poor brave old dear!" and she flung her arms round his neck and burst into tears.

"There, there," said Mr. Welby, patting her head. "What's all this about? This isn't like you, Prim. You're the one we look to for to make us laugh at our troubles, not for displays of waterworks."

"Yes, and so I will," said Primrose, drying her eyes. "Ha, ha, ha. It's very funny really—damned funny, if you look at it in the right light. Go on with your story, you old windbag."

"Prim," said Mrs. Welby, "that's not the way to speak to your father. Don't drop back into that style."

"Let her be," said Mr. Welby, gently. "Well now, where was I?"

Then he told her how, through the kindness of an accidental acquaintance, he had secured an engagement; and for a little while he generalized, holding forth quite in his old Clapham style.

"It is always the same thing. Look at that wood fire," and he pointed to the dying embers. "We have no claim of any sort on this Mrs. Sell of Block B, yet she brings us a nice bit of wood out of her overplus. Who is it that has helped us, time and often? Those one might have expected? No. Those who owed us nothing. In the beginning, when we lowered our pride to ask, we met with silence or refusal, until I gave you all the order never again to apply to old friends. Was I right?"

"You're always right," said Primrose, with a shrill little laugh; and she got up and began to clear the table.

By the light of the one candle, Mrs. Welby presently read them a letter from Jack that had come that afternoon. Jack reported himself as in the best of health, but regretted to say that he was no nearer the officer's commission which he craved for than when he last wrote. "They pass me over every time," wrote Jack.

"*Disgraceful* of them," said Mrs. Welby.

"Yes, so it is," said Mr. Welby. "But he doesn't assert himself enough. If he had a little more push he'd get it."

The girls were busy tidying, putting everything away, making the beds in both rooms ready for the night; and as they moved to and fro he settled future arrangements with them. Apart from the fact that there was no accommodation for them at the mews,

Brixton Hill would be too far from their work. He said they could stay here till the end of the week, and then they must rent a single room.

"Don't you trouble about us, father."

"No, my dear Vi, I don't trouble, because so long as you are together with the same firm, doing well, as you are, you can afford to live by yourselves decently and comfortably. Don't think," he hastened to add, "that when I speak of your being able to afford things, I am belittling the generous aid you give to us. Your conduct, all through, has made me prouder than I can ever say."

"Father, please don't."

"Prim, my little fairy, I mean it. . . . Now off to bed with you. And bless you both."

CHAPTER II

SMALL as was the bed they shared together, it occupied nearly the whole space of the back room and rendered undressing difficult; so that some little time elapsed before they crept into it. The night was cold; they had piled their skirts and petticoats on top of the scanty blankets, and they snuggled close for warmth and yet lay shivering while they listened to sounds from the front room.

Their parents were already in bed there, and soon a deep and plaintive snoring announced that both slept. Sure now that they would not be overheard, the girls began to whisper about their carefully-guarded secret.

The secret was that they were not doing well. They had never done well. But they had always pretended to do well, so as to keep their parents in heart. From the beginning they had pooled their resources, putting all their earnings together, and from the common fund drawing that unfailing weekly contribution of which Mr. Welby spoke with such gratitude and pride. Unhappily the contribution had not been entirely earned; to keep it going they had been forced to sell, bit by bit, all of those personal belongings which Mr. Welby still supposed to be stored in some safe deposit. Nothing remained to them—not even Primrose's violin, not even Violet's dictionary of comparative quotations.

Further than this, they were not, as Mr. Welby

believed, in work; they were out of work. Till this week they had been working at a milliner's shop kept by a man and his wife, who were successfully profiteering by the rapid creation of useful outfits for war brides, and ornamental weeds for war widows; but last week they had been summarily dismissed. The man-milliner, elderly but amorous, had said something to Primrose—something that caused Primrose, in a flash of her old quick spirit, to slap his face. From spite he at once "turned her off"; and his wife dismissed Violet to make a clean sweep of it. She vowed that they had both been trying to get at her husband from the moment they entered the workroom, making eyes at him, leading him on to forget himself. They were not to send anyone to her for a character. If they did, she would say precisely what she thought of them.

In such matters there was no rivalry between the sisters nowadays. Indeed it seemed a cruelly ironical stroke of fate that they who had sought so hard for admirers should now find them at every corner, that they should as it were be tripped up by them when they least expected it, and thus be forced to lament the possession of charms which once they were so eager to enhance by every artificial aid.

What were they to do? Primrose whispered the question, after alluding to their latest calamity. Where were they to get next week's pound for father and mother?

"Father will lose this new job, just as he has lost every other job," whispered Violet. "He'll do something stupendously clumsy or stupid—without even being aware that he's doing it."

"I know, I know," said Primrose in a throbbing

whisper. "Poor old darling, he sees nothing, he learns nothing. How *can* he have got on in that warehouse for so many years? And then, Vi, only to think of his trying to join the army"; and Primrose's whisper throbbed and wavered. "Vi, when he sat there talking of it, and I thought of his helplessness, his incompetence, and his brave loyal heart, it was as if something deep inside me began to bleed; and it goes on bleeding."

"Yes, I felt the same. Mother too," whispered Violet dolefully. "She's just as helpless—just as hopelessly incapable. Yet you know how we always thought she was a good manager—and ran the house properly. I suppose it was Sarah who really did it all and kept her straight. Now she simply doesn't seem to have an idea. She makes every possible mistake, doesn't she? I'd cut my tongue out sooner than reproach her; but it's so pitifully obvious, isn't it?"

Thus, whispering in the darkness, they criticized their parents, but with a pity and a love so intense that criticism was like respectful praise.

"Oh, Vi, we *mustn't* fail them, we *won't* fail them. But, oh, what are we to do?" Then Primrose, who truly in these hard years had shown a courage from which the other three had derived support, who had entirely put aside her ancient habit of shedding tears, now wept most bitterly upon her sister's shoulder, and for a little while seemed altogether to lose heart. She made no noise, for fear of waking the sleepers; she just lay shaking and writhing, with the tears flowing.

"Vi," she whispered, when she was able to articulate again, "is there a curse upon us all? If not, why

should we fail—I mean, you and I, just as much as those two poor dears? Jack too! To-night I feel as if it's no use struggling. We are doomed. We shall go on dropping down and down—no matter how we try. We shall sink—deeper and deeper—to the very gutter"; and she contorted herself, and clung to her sister as if for refuge from what was coming to them.

Then after a miserable silence she slowly straightened her spine and ceased to writhe.

"Vi dear, forgive me. We—we *won't* fail. I swear it. If there's a curse I defy it. I—I'll curse too. I *won't* be beaten. I'll do something reckless and desperate sooner than give in."

"Ah, that's the real Primrose."

"But, Vi dear, we must separate. It's no good trying to keep together any longer. There are things I could do by myself that I couldn't do with you."

And not for the first time she hinted at the possibility of Violet's going into domestic service. They had both agreed in the beginning that nothing should ever force them to what they felt would be too cruel a humiliation. They would rough it, take hard knocks, waive the last pretensions to gentility, but they would die rather than wear housemaids' aprons and call people Ma'am and Miss. Now, however, as destiny's pincers closed further, Primrose began to think that it might perhaps be wise for Violet to break her vow. Domestic servants were so scarce that situations could sometimes be obtained by girls who had neither training nor character.

But it was Violet's turn to shiver and weep. "Don't ask me to do that," she whimpered. "Prim, I *couldn't*

bear it. It may be false pride—I dare say it is. Only it would kill me to give it up altogether.”

And Primrose, whatever she really thought, said it was not false pride but proper pride. No matter what happened, no one should ever make Violet be a servant.

“So don’t cry. Vi, I’ve been a selfish pig to upset you like this merely because I felt a little low. I could kick myself for doing it, when I think what you’ve had on your mind”; and there was an immense tenderness in Primrose’s whispered words. “You’ve been so plucky about it. You poor old Vi, you poor dear old Vi.”

“No, on my honour, Prim, it means nothing to me. Why should I mind? I know—I always knew that he never cared for me. It was only the money.”

“But you, Vi, didn’t you ever care for him, not a little bit? Didn’t you think about him? Well, I must say you’ve been an absolute brick in taking it as you have.”

What Violet had taken so well was the surprise, great or little, that all unexpected news must occasion. The two sisters had been studying newspapers at a free public library in search of likely openings, when, passing from advertisements to editorial columns, they fell upon the announcement that a marriage had been arranged and would shortly take place between Captain the Honourable Adolphus Faring, D.S.O., and Irene, only child of the late Micah Quartz and Mrs. Quartz of No. 200, Prince’s Gate.

“No,” Violet repeated, “it means nothing to me.” Then by a natural sequence of ideas, she touched upon the subject of Hugo Blyth. “I don’t want to pry;

so don't answer if you don't like. But are you still corresponding with him?"

"Yes, I heard from him three days ago."

"Yet you say you were never really fond of him?"

"I was never so fond of him as I am now. Vi, I think it's so awfully decent of him to have wanted to keep in touch, and to have gone on wanting it for such a time. I love getting his letters, because they cheer me up. As I read them I seem to hear him laughing. *How* he used to laugh, didn't he? And I believe now he's the only person alive who honestly treats this infernal war as a joke."

"But, Primrose, if you feel like this, why do you refuse to see him when he comes on leave?"

"How *could* I?" whispered Primrose distressfully. "My word, it would stop even him laughing if I turned up in my rags at the Ritz Hotel. Of course he knows we're broke to the world, but if he saw with his own eyes what our real state is, why it would be worse than shell-shock. He'd have a fit. He'd want to give me money—all he had about him—straightway. And—and—Vi—suppose I yielded to temptation—and took it! Of course I wouldn't really. I should die of shame, if I did."

And whether Violet thought this was false shame or the best type of that emotion, she said her sister was quite right to allow it to rule her conduct.

"I shouldn't worry," she whispered, "if I wasn't afraid that thoughts of Hugo make you suffer—that you really are a tiny piece in love with him after all."

"Then don't worry. He was never anything to me but an amusing pal—and his value has only increased because I haven't as many pals as I used to have";

and she laughed very softly. "I've never been in love, Vi. Love's a big thing—too big for such an undersized little imp as me."

Violet sighed.

Then after a long silence Primrose whispered sleepily.

"Vi, beastly as the world is, there's more real good in people than I used to think."

Long before they woke in the morning their father had gone to Brixton. About ten o'clock he returned with Diomed and the van; friendly neighbours in the block assisted to bring down and load the small array of furniture and belongings; and the winter sunlight shone feebly on them as Mr. and Mrs. Welby drove away.

"Steady now, Diomed. What yer looking at? Never seen a lorry before? Or an omnibus either? None of your shying, sir, with *me*. Steady now."

Mr. Welby was busy indeed, quick to suspect evil intentions in Diomed and quicker still to circumvent them. Mrs. Welby at his side enjoyed the movement, the colour, the panorama of life. An outing was a treat. She too thought that it was very like one of their drives in Manger's T-cart. Only they never used to venture into the noise and bustle of the crowded city.

"Old lady," said Mr. Welby, beaming at her when the worst was over, "this is a bit of all right, eh? Not nervous of the traffic?"

"Oh, no," said Mrs. Welby. "I know what a splendid whip you are"; and she chattered contentedly, and sometimes laughed aloud.

She never tittered nowadays. She had been free of that queer affection for a very long time.

But her spirits fell after they had crossed the river and were drawing nearer to the old familiar ground.

"What's the matter, mother?"

She confessed that she was thinking of chance encounters with people who had known them in the past, their old tradesmen, even residents of "the road." It would be rather dreadful, sitting in this van, to come face to face with Mrs. Verity or the Castlemaines or the Fardels.

"They wouldn't recognize us," said Mr. Welby. "They wouldn't be thinking about us, or looking for us."

"But to-morrow—or any time. Suppose Mr. Jobson or one of them comes into the mews, or catches you outside the shop? We do seem to be getting very near."

"See here," said Mr. Welby. "The mews and the shop are over a mile from our road, as the crow flies. Now cheer up, old lady. Don't spoil it all. . . . *Steady!* Would you, you rascal? D'you notice how he pricks his ears and plunges forward? He can smell his stable. By the way, the stable does smell a bit strong, and our rocm's just over it."

CHAPTER III

PPRIMROSE was showing her legs at last, but not enjoying it. People mocked at them.

"Get inside, please," she said shrilly. "I can't have you standing here."

She had just stopped the omnibus to take up two men who shouted from the darkness of a suburban road not very far from the end of her journey. If there had been light enough to see them properly she would have passed by, leaving them to slang her from the pavement; for they proved to be passengers of the roughest and most forbidding character. Now they stood in the narrow space between the staircase and the doorway, and refused to budge.

"You heard what I said," she repeated. "Get inside. You can't stand here."

But they said there were already too many people standing inside the 'bus; besides, there was no head room for men of their fine stature. Then one of them said he did not mind standing on top of the 'bus, and he began to mount the stairs.

"No," said Primrose, "that's not allowed. No standing on top."

Then they showed themselves for the brutes they were, defying her and abusing her.

Primrose jerked the bell, and the omnibus slowed down and presently stopped.

"Now you two," she said. "Are you going to get inside this 'bus this minute and behave yourselves?"

They said they were not, opprobriously.

"Then get off the 'bus, both of you."

But they said they did not propose to do that either.

"Very well. Then this 'bus doesn't move on again till you're off it. And as soon as I can see a peeler, I give you in charge, my friends. Understand that."

Her heart was beating wildly; she would have liked to leave the 'bus herself and run a long way from it; but her courage rose to meet the great necessity. This was the kind of battle that she had been dreading for six weeks. They had said she was too small, too lady-like; that if challenged she would not exercise sufficient authority, and she had sworn that she was afraid of nothing. She must not quail.

Holding the brass bar she leaned towards the pavement, and peered at the darkness in both directions. But of course there were no policemen in this suburban wilderness.

"I say. Bed-time," called one of the inside passengers, and he pulled the bell cord.

"Don't you dare touch that cord," said Primrose, loud and shrill; and she herself gave the cord a second jerk. "You see my predicament, and it's your duty to assist me, not to impede me."

The omnibus had moved forward a few yards, but at Primrose's signal it stopped again.

Then all the passengers began to talk.

"She began it," said a fat old woman. "Why couldn't she ask the gentlemen civilly? Then perhaps they'd 'a' done what she asked. But that's the way wi' gells nowadays—no politeness, no respect for those older than themselves. "Do this. Do that." They

seem to think they can give their orders to everybody."

"I've a train to catch," said an old man. And they all talked at once. "Are we goin' to wait here till midnight? . . . What's the sense of it? . . . Why can't you leave the girl alone when she's trying to do her duty? . . . Here, come inside and be finished with it. . . . Well, you needn't quarrel with *me*. . . . I'm not quarrelling with either of you."

Then some young soldiers of the new armies, sitting deep in the 'bus, spoke with youthful indignation.

"No, hang it all, it isn't fair on her. All right, miss. We're coming to pitch the blighters into the road for you."

"No, sit down, please," Primrose called to them. "Much obliged, but I want no assistance of any kind whatever, thank you. They think they're being very clever, but they're dam' soon going to find themselves in the wrong box."

"*There's* a spit-fire," said the fat old lady, as if grievously shocked. "Did you hear that?"

Then the driver of the 'bus, leaning out of his seat, shouted in a husky growling voice:

"What's the trouble?"

"Only two blackguards holding up the 'bus," shrilled Primrose, "and preventing thirty other people from getting home to their suppers and their beds."

That was a good speech of Primrose's, and it won the battle for her. With the exception of the old lady, the whole 'bus ranged itself definitely on her side; and such a storm burst forth against those bad men that, reluctant and still abusive, they dropped off the platform.

Primrose rang the bell triumphantly, and as the 'bus lurched into motion she fired parting shots at the vanquished.

"You'll hear of this again, my lads. Don't you think I've done with you."

Then she wriggled into the 'bus, and with tremulous fingers clicked her puncher as she issued a few more tickets. "Fares, please. Any more fares? . . . Another penny, sir, to the 'Green Dragon.'"

Her heart was still beating fast and her head had begun to ache violently; she was dead-tired, and she felt a little faint after the recent strain and excitement; but nevertheless she tasted a fierce exulting joy. This was life; this was success. And her thoughts sustained her. "I am a 'bus conductor," she thought proudly, "doing a man's work, and drawing magnificent money. I have done it for six long weeks, and if I keep it going, as I shall, that precious old pair of babies are safely provided for."

The 'bus had to be stopped frequently now, and it was empty when, reaching its terminus, it jolted round a corner out of the high road and came to rest by a patch of waste ground behind some gas works. There was a thin covering of snow on this empty area, and the whole scene was dark and dismal. By reason of war regulations not a light showed from the windows of adjacent houses. A man came out of an invisible shelter and told them that they were behind time. They must be ready to move in thirteen minutes instead of the usual fifteen.

"Righto," said Primrose.

"Come and eat your grub," said the driver, growlingly. He stood near the step, enormous in his leather

coat and gloves, slapping his vast chest; and as he walked cumbrously across the snow one saw him vaguely, looking like a grizzly bear.

Primrose settled down in a corner of the 'bus, and by the dim light put her ticket case to rights, arranged the money in the compartments of her wallet, made up her fare-sheet, and so forth. Then, these matters completed, she stretched her legs, produced a brush and removed some mud-stains from the black gaiters; for a moment took off her peaked cap and smoothed her pretty hair; pulled the cross straps into position on her shoulders, putting the red number disk under the straps in front; and then she rose, dragged down the skirts of her tunic, and left the 'bus to take care of itself.

The driver sat munching alone in the small wooden shelter, which was furnished merely with a couple of benches and some curtains to prevent the escape of any gleams from the oil lamp.

"Have a drop out of this," said the driver, offering a tin bottle.

"No, thank you, Dick," said Primrose courteously; and she sat on the opposite bench and began to eat two pieces of bread with a slice of cheese between.

"Are yer cold?"

Primrose, busy eating and thinking, did not answer.

Dick repeated the question, loudly. "I say, are yer cold?"

"Oh! No. No, thank you, Dick."

Dick chuckled. "Come and snuggle inside my overcoat, if y'are"; and he opened the voluminous garment hospitably.

"No, thank you," said Primrose, lightly and

brightly. "I should be afraid to lose myself inside a tent of that size."

"Haw-haw. Come and set on my knee then."

"No, Dick, there's too much engine oil on your knees."

"Haw-haw. I'll lay me 'an'kerchief crost 'em. Come on. Why not? I'm old enough to be yer fawther."

And this was true. Dick, like most other 'bus-drivers at this late period of the war, had passed middle life; but it was Primrose's peculiar misfortune that she exercised a sort of fatal fascination over elderly gentlemen. From the very first journey she had known that she must be on her guard with this old bear, and it was not the least of her difficulties, the keeping of Dick in his place without offending him. A row with Dick would put the lid on everything. Moreover, Dick as well as many other male employees of the company, resented the engagement of young females at the same high wages that they themselves were receiving. Thus there was hostility as well as affection for her to combat. Dick could pass rapidly from amiable badinage to growling ferocity.

"Come on. I'm a married man too."

"That goes without saying," said Primrose, gaily. "They're not likely to have allowed a person of your merit to remain a bachelor."

"Haw-haw."

"And I'm sure you've got a very nice wife, Dick. You must never forget your good fortune—not even for half a minute."

But this allusion to his domestic happiness made Dick moody, if it did not actually huff him. He began to growl.

"Fawthers of families," he grumbled, as if to himself; "and then come and take the bread out of their children's mouths. Same pay, if you please. Look here," he said very loudly. "If I had me way with you girls, I'd slap all your trousers and send you home again."

"Oh, thank you for nothing," said Primrose, hotly.

"Yes, I would"; and he continued to growl. "What are their expenses? They've on'y themselves to keep. I've people dependent on me, I have."

"And how d'you know I haven't people dependent on me?"

"Gammon."

Next moment they were chipping at each other sharply; treble and bass; nag, nag, nag.

But another 'bus had arrived at the terminus; and its driver and conductor came into the shelter. They were both men, two more bears, as big as Dick.

"Nah-nah," said one of them facetiously, interrupting the squabble. "Give him a kiss and be friends. No quarreling. Conductor and driver is more like husband and wife than anything else nowadays. I ain't got my bit o' fluff aboard yet; but no doubt I shall have one served out to me before long. A 'bus don't seem in the fashion without a packet o' hairpins on the back step."

"Yes," said Dick, "she's earned my 'bus a nickname. They call us Beauty and the Beast."

"Lor', I don't think it's fair to call her that. I rather like the look of her."

And the three men chaffed Primrose roughly, till another 'bus arrived. The arrival of the second 'bus meant that Primrose and Dick must start again. The

time-keeper called to them, and they were about to leave the shelter when a travelling inspector looked in.

This higher type of official was always a dreaded visitor. He and his kind flitted here and there, popped out of one 'bus into another, fell on you from the skies.

He too made mock of Primrose; not rudely as the others, but in more deadly fashion. He said it was a mystery to him how she had ever been "passed," since she did not seem strong enough for such arduous work—"too much of a flibberty-jibbet to bear the fatigue of it"; and when Primrose pleaded and protested he only nodded his head and laughed. Then Primrose appealed despairingly to her mate.

"Don't be mean, Dick. Speak up for me."

"She's all right," said Dick grudgingly, as he pulled on his gloves. "I've no complaints."

"Say more than that, Dick. Say I do my work as well as a man could."

Dick looked at her, then gave a magnanimous growl.

"So she does," said Dick. "I've known men do it worse. And she's a rare good plucked 'un."

But it was all no use. The inspector made a bad report, and the next day they took her before grim authorities at headquarters. Entreaties were without avail. These gentlemen listened to her politely and spoke very gently and deprecatingly, but they told her she must go.

"I'm sure you will easily find something more suitable," said the spokesman. "By your diction you appear to belong to the upper classes—and no doubt have taken up this job in a fantastic spirit of patriotism. But is it quite fair to girls who have not

your advantages, and to whom the remuneration may be a matter of some importance?"

"Nothing could be further from the truth. No one can need it more than——"

But they did not listen any further. Their subordinates told her to draw a week's pay, to hand in her tickets, number disk, and wallet, at a certain desk, and to take her uniform to such and such a place.

CHAPTER IV

PPRIMROSE put on her petticoats again, and sank a little further. The new drop was symbolized by the fact that she worked now below ground, in the basement of a huge Tottenham Court Road shop. These fundamental depths were used as the Toy Bazaar, and she with a dozen other underpaid girls found it no easy task to get rid of the wretched trumpery stuff that alone was obtainable after nearly four years of war.

"At any rate we guarantee it's all made in England," said Primrose, apologetically, to the dreadful common customers. "It's a comfort to feel it doesn't come from enemy countries."

"I don't know as it is a comfort," said a horrid woman. "I want the comfort of feeling I've got my money's worth."

"Would your little boy like a wooden chicky-biddy then? These chicky-biddies were made by some of our blinded soldiers."

"So I should think," said the woman, scornfully. "Blinded! And struck stupid too! Lost their hands and made 'em with their feet, from the look of them. No. Take 'em away."

"What about a train then? See!" Primrose stooped, and holding a quite abominably bad locomotive on a level with the urchin's eyes twirled the wheels. "'Puff-puff,' says the train. 'Puff-puff-puff'"; and she laughed merrily.

She laughed in these days because she had been ordered to do so.

"Selling toys ith really an art," said the manager of the department, with enthusiasm. He was a Jew. "You got to be merry and bright. With little boyth and girlth, you got to make yourthelf a child too. Another thing to remember! Women are only grown-up children. That'th pthychology, that ith. Oftentimes you can dithpose of an article with a laugh when argument will leave it unsold."

So Primrose laughed.

She was on her feet until six o'clock in the evening, and after that she had dressmaker's work at which she sometimes toiled half through the night. No wonder she looked tired when she came to the bazaar of a morning. But her hope was that she would soon escape from the toys and the cellar.

A little way further down the road a better-class establishment was doing a fine trade in selling pianos to fabulously overpaid munitions-workers, and Primrose had been promised a place in its show-room if she could fit herself out with a decent dress and a pair of steel-buckled shoes. To this end, then, she was scraping, saving, and feverishly labouring.

The rich rewards of her conductorship had not only supplied the weekly dole, but had enabled her to put by a little, and so far Violet too had regularly paid her share to the pool as well as supported herself.

Now, however, Violet defaulted. The sisters used to meet every Saturday and spend their evening with Mr. and Mrs. Welby in the room over the stable, where one could hear Diomed pulling his rack-chain and stamping his feet so plainly that he seemed almost

to be one of the party. On this portentous evening Violet waited for Primrose outside the stable instead of going up stairs.

"Prim," she said tragically, "I'm on the rocks. I daren't look you in the face," and she wrung her hands. "I haven't brought any money."

Primrose said that it did not matter in the least, because she could very well carry on unassisted. But she was full of anxiety on Violet's account.

"Vi darling, can you anyhow manage—I mean, for yourself only?"

"Oh, rather."

"What are you doing, exactly? Why won't you tell me?"

"Don't ask," said Violet, rather wildly. "I'm all right. Whatever happens, don't bother about me."

Then they went upstairs, and together put a good face on it before the old people.

But now Violet not only defaulted, she disappeared. Next Saturday Mr. and Mrs. Welby looked for her in vain, and Primrose coming rather late reported that she had received a note from her sister to say she was occupied.

"I expect she's too busy to get away," said Primrose in cheery tones. "Well, how wags the world with you, father? Mother dear, here's the usual."

"And more welcome than ever it was," said Mrs. Welby. "Milk up twopence. And flour—well, flour, I don't know *what* it hasn't risen to!"

"Matches too!" said Mr. Welby. "And tobacco likewise." He was filling his pipe, and he lit it with a screw of paper from the little bit of fire. "Here, mother, put those sticks on and make Prim a cup o'

tea. I'm sure she'll be glad of it after her walk. Or did you tram it, dear?"

"No, I walked," said Primrose. "The exercise does me good."

Then, smoking his pipe, Mr. Welby gave her the latest news about Root the greengrocer, speaking of his employer very much as he used to speak years ago of the venerated partners at the warehouse. He had heard originally that Root was a vindictive greedy man, but he could not find that Root deserved such epithets. "The devil is never as black as he is painted, my little Prim. Mr. Root has treated me with a good deal of consideration. A bit suspicious at first, but now I think he feels the satisfaction of having somebody honest and trustworthy. He trusts me more than he did my predecessor. Confidence begets confidence. I don't like his wife, and I never shall; but I make allowances for her. She 'as been imposed on so often that she feels she can't trust *anybody*."

And Mr. Welby went on to lament the fact that there were a great many rogues and vagabonds hanging about London nowadays. He said the explanation of this regrettable state of affairs was very simple. The war when it started had taken the best of England's manhood; then, going on so long, it had taken the second-best, and the third-best; and now there was nothing left but mere skulking riff-raff—or, what was worse, men who had entered the army and been discharged for bad conduct.

"I mention it to show you how careful one has to be, Primrose. You beware of strangers of all sorts. If men you don't know—no matter what their age—attempt to get into conversation with you, well, don't

be drawn into it. If people ask you questions, pretending to show interest, turn it off with a word, and don't answer the questions. Don't never say who you are, or what you are, or where you're going. As the song puts it, 'Still keep something to yourself you will not tell to any.'"

"Righto," said Primrose, sipping the cup of tea. "I'm delighted, father, that you're getting on so famously. You do really feel your feet under you?"

"I do, my dear."

In fact Mr. Welby was getting along satisfactorily. He had had a few accidents—as when, during the process of "putting-to," he let the van shafts fall upon the back of Diomed in so startling a fashion that the docile creature took fright and galloped up the mews with traces flying. Fortunately, however, men at the top of the mews stopped the run-away and brought it back. The people of the mews were very kind to Mr. Welby, helping him often, and teaching him many things that were useful in the discharge of his duties.

The conveyance of actual vegetables was the lightest part of these duties; Mr. Root dealt also in coal and mineral waters, and his van was in great request for odd jobs, such as moving pieces of furniture, taking luggage to railway stations, and so on. Thus Mr. Welby was little concerned with the shop itself or its hand-to-hand trade. He did not know, for instance, that among occasional customers there was a Miss Brown who kept a private hotel near Clapham Junction.

But one morning, receiving his instructions, he was

given two bundles of seakale for delivery to this lady.

"Put them last on your list," said Mr. Root, "and get rid of your coals and potatoes and all the heavy stuff first. Then go on to Brown's. It's beyond the tram junction—a small road up to the right."

"Oh, I know my way there," said Mr. Welby.

"Then come straight back and report. I've a bigish job for you to do after dinner."

"Very good," said Mr. Welby; and he started on his round.

Most painful emotions possessed him an hour later as he approached his old home. He drove slower and slower, and he sighed heavily when he turned Diomed's head and left the tramlines behind him. It was uphill now, so the horse of its own accord subsided to a walking pace.

At the familiar corner the horse or the driver decided to halt altogether, and the van remained motionless while Mr. Welby sat staring and sighing. There was the house in full sight now, just as it had always been, except for the fact that its blinds, as well as those of the two houses on the other side of it, were new and of a bright red colour. Also there was a large board, set diagonally in the front garden, announcing that it was called now Hillside, and that it professed to be a high-class Private Hotel.

Minutes passed and still Mr. Welby sat idle, merely suffering instead of doing his job. All the past had returned to his mind. He remembered his pride when, going to the City of a morning, he stood at this corner to look back at the house; he remembered too the wicked thoughts he had entertained when, looking at the house with old Nick at his side, it had seemed to

him a mean and poor little thing. It seemed to him a palace now.

And for the first time shame overwhelmed him, as he sat there shrinking from the ordeal that lay before him. It was too bitter a humiliation—to drive past what had been his own front door, to stop at the side gate, and to carry vegetables through the tradesman's passage, and hand them in at the kitchen door; he, who had been master there, to appear as a green-grocer's man, and deliver seakale to her who had been his servant.

As he thought of Sarah, all courage forsook him. He could not face Sarah. He remembered, too well, how harshly and coldly he had treated Sarah in his hours of prosperity. Of course he might escape being seen by Sarah; he could, with luck, hand in the seakale to cook or kitchenmaid and slink away unobserved by their mistress. But the risk would be too great. Sarah, like a good manager, would be downstairs in her kitchen. She would spot him— "But, bless me, who's this? Do my eyes deceive me? No. Surely not? Yes, it is——"

He simply could not face it; his emotions entirely overcame him.

He got down from the van, and beckoned to a young man of the humblest class, who was leaning against a lamp-post with his hands in his pockets.

"See here," he said agitatedly to the young man. "Do me a kindness, and in exchange I'll give you sixpence"; and he instructed this deputy to take the seakale to the house, hand it in with the invoice, and return at once. "I shall stay here," he added, "and watch you do it."

The young fellow was soon back again, but during his brief absence Mr. Welby had been joined by somebody else. This was an older man, who said he was a friend of the youth, and very courteously declared that it gave him pleasure to see his young pal making himself useful. He refused to allow Mr. Welby to part with the promised sixpence.

"Ned," he said severely to the youth, "you don't need to accept money for performing a simple kindness." Then, scrutinizing Mr. Welby, he spoke with respectful sympathy. "You'll excuse me, sir, but you're feeling ill, aren't you?"

Mr Welby confessed that something had upset him, and for a moment he had come over a bit queer.

"Then you come along with me," said the stranger, with a sort of hearty, impulsive good-nature. "It's a tot of whisky *you* want to pull you round, and I'm going to see you have it—at my expense too. The pubs will be just open. Here, Ned, you lead the horse, and let the gentleman walk with me. Allow me to offer you my arm, sir."

At the last moment, outside the public-house, Mr. Welby attempted to resist temptation; saying he thanked both the elder man and the younger man for their kindness, but he could not leave the horse.

However, the friendly strangers prevailed. They helped him to put the nose-bag on Diomed.

"Now he won't budge, guv'nor," said the youth, smiling at Mr. Welby, while he patted and caressed Diomed in an affectionate manner. "He's got his snack and he knows his master is close by. Animals are very human, I always think."

This was Mr. Welby's first lapse for a very long

time, and it proved a fatal one. His only excuse was that his recent emotion had been too much for him. But oh, why did not he remember the wise advice he had offered to Primrose?

He stood in the hateful little bar drinking with these strangers, talking to them more and more freely. They stood round him, admiring him, flattering him, saying anybody could see with half an eye that he was a broken-down gentleman. A third stranger, a tall man, who wore a football jersey instead of a shirt under his ragged jacket, was especially full of compliments. He said again and again that it was an honour to pay for the refreshment of such a real top-class old gentleman.

And Mr. Welby told them his story, explaining how badly he had been treated by the law of the land. He went on talking till one after another they slipped away. For a few minutes he was talking alone to the youth's elderly pal, and then he was talking to himself with nobody there at all.

"Outside," said the barman, leaning over the bar and tapping him on the arm. "You've had your day's ration, and I'm not going to serve you with any more."

"Don't talk to me like that," said Mr. Welby rather thickly, and in a slow dignified manner he went out to the street.

The crisp fresh air for a moment made him dizzy, then next moment he was completely sobered by the shock of fear. Diomed and the van were nowhere to be seen. He trotted hurriedly up and down the street, stood panting and staring at various corners, but they as well as the strangers had vanished utterly.

"What you think they been and done with them?" he asked a policeman.

"Why, stolen them," said the policeman.

"Never!" said Mr. Welby, in the utmost perturbation. "Surely you don't think they'd have the daring to steal a van and a horse?"

The policeman laughed. "There was three lorries and a traction engine pinched complete, up there beyond the Common, only a week ago."

Mr. Welby went to the nearest police station to give particulars of this daring daylight outrage, and stopped to tell all policemen about it as he hurried home to tell Mr. Root.

Root took the news badly. Indeed, the latent vindictiveness of Root at once rose to the surface. He, too, sought the assistance of the police, and he gave Mr. Welby in charge to them as principal party to the robbery.

He was brought before a magistrate next day, and the vindictive Root made everything seem as black as possible for him. Mrs. Root also was implacably hard against him. Remanded without bail, he lay in his cell and the cruel days passed while Mrs. Welby went hither and thither desperately seeking aid. She and her husband had long since rendered themselves such unwelcome visitors at the office of Mr. Rolls, in Lincoln's Inn Fields, that a very strict guard was kept there to prevent either of them from obtaining access to the principal; but Mrs. Welby beat down all opposition.

Mr. Rolls, waving his eye-glass, reiterated the assurance of the sympathy he had always felt for the whole

family. Nevertheless, he could not take up the case. No, this sort of thing was altogether alien to the habits of his firm. Mrs. Welby must apply to a police court practitioner. Nor could Mr. Rolls offer any pecuniary assistance; he was very sorry, but the family, as Mrs. Welby should know, were already very much in his debt—for the costs incurred with regard to the bankruptcies and the settlement of affairs. Indeed, these matters were not yet settled; they were still “in the office,” receiving frequent attention, adding to the debt. No, Mr. Rolls had done a great deal for the Welbys, and he really could not do any more—not even a very little more.

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“But my husband is innocent,” protested Mrs. Welby; “as innocent as the babe unborn.”

“Well, Mr. Smart is your man, either way,” said the clerk.

Mrs. Welby found this Mr. Smart, but was thrown into further despair by his demand for his fees in advance before going into court. Only such a few pounds and shillings; Mr. Welby’s freedom and reputation hanging in the balance, and credit for the trifling sum absolutely refused!

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Thus another dark wave passed over the heads of the Welbys, submerging them deeper. Mr. Welby was homeless and out of work; Violet had disappeared; poor little Primrose by denuding herself had been forced to postpone all her hopes of the new dress and the better place.

She worked harder than ever, cutting down expenses in the direction of nourishment, fighting the world gamely on an often empty stomach. One evening, tired and hungry, she came into an A.B.C. shop before going on to collect her nightly task from the dressmaker; and sitting at one of the marble tables she opened her purse on her knees, to be quite sure that she had made no mistake. The purse contained five pennies, a half-penny, a packet of needles, and nothing more. She laid the five pennies on the table, put her purse and gloves on top of them, and then studiously examined the bill of fare. Cup of chocolate, fourpence; small roll, one penny! That would be the most sustaining repast she could get for her money, and presently she gave the order for it.

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"No, not butter," said Primrose. "I won't require

any butter. Just a roll—a small roll, please—the penny roll, not the two-penny.”

And she sat there waiting, gnawed by hunger. Looking about once, she fancied that a pale young man seated at a table in front of hers was observing her; he had a newspaper, but it seemed to her that instead of reading it he watched her. She immediately turned her eyes, and, picking up the bill of fare again, glanced through it. But the printed names of the solid hot dishes made her feel sick with longing. Why were they making her wait such a time? Why wouldn't they bring her something to eat? She put down the too alluring sheet, leaned back against the red velvet behind her, and with half-closed eyes looked at the carved beams and glass panels of the ceiling.

While she maintained this attitude the pale young man was watching her over the top of his newspaper. As soon as she came in he had noticed her fair hair and blue eyes, and something in her expression that was at once defiant and piteously childlike. Now he noticed her whiteness, her hollow cheeks, her too sharply pointed little chin.

Then Primrose changed her attitude. Slowly but decisively, she rolled over sideways and lay without moving on the red-velvet seat.

“Here. Quick,” said the pale young man, springing up and going to her. “This young lady has fainted.”

Other people went to her, including the manageress, who sat her up, slapped her hands, and dealt with her in a kind, businesslike manner. During the general confusion and solicitude the young man unobtrusively picked up her purse and opened it. He shut it pres-

ently, and a moment after he had done so the manageress saw it in his hand.

"That's her purse, isn't it?" said the manageress sharply and suspiciously. "Leave that alone, please."

"Yes," said the young man feebly, still holding it. "See, she's coming to," and as Primrose opened her eyes he laid the purse on the table.

"Silly of me," said Primrose to the manageress. "I am so sorry. But it's very hot in here, don't you think?"

"No, nothing to mention," said the manageress kindly. "But you're tired, perhaps. You do look a little tired."

"I'm so sorry to have given trouble," said Primrose, and she clutched at her purse, as though instead of being empty it was full, and moved her gloves to see that the five pennies were safe.

Everybody had sat down again. The cup of chocolate and the small roll were brought to her, and as soon as possible she finished her meal and hurried from the place.

"Are you quite recovered?" said the manageress, at the door.

"Quite," said Primrose firmly, "and so much obliged to you for your kindness."

In less than an hour she was in her miserable attic, with a pile of work that she had brought back from the dressmaker. She felt "swimmy" about the head, and as hungry as ever; but she set herself resolutely to the work. She stitched and stitched, until she broke her needle. Then she reached for her purse, and opened it.

It was no longer an empty purse. It contained, as

well as the halfpenny and the packet of needles, a couple of one-pound notes.

Primrose stood up to think about this miracle, and she grew hot and cold as she thought. There could be only one explanation. While she was unconscious somebody in the A.B.C. shop had put the money in her purse; somebody, guessing at her abject poverty, had taken pity on her. Some soft-hearted person had given her the money in pity—in *pity*. How horrible and disgusting!

What could she do? She must get the money back into the hands of this well-meaning and unintentionally insulting person without a minute's avoidable delay. But how? Take it back to the manageress and leave it in her custody—ask her to pin up a notice saying it was there to be claimed? Perhaps it was the manageress herself who had done the deed. Or that woman who put her hat straight for her? Or the man with the long beard? He looked stupid and benevolent. Oh, what was she to do?

But then an impalpable tremendous force asserted itself, not merely suggesting but commanding her what to do. This force was hunger. And it sent her down the long flights of stairs, out into the street to a baker's shop.

She came back after her elemental, instinct-driven excursion, hugging a loaf from which she cut an enormous slice. But she shuddered as she bit. For the first time in her life she was eating such food. It was the bread of charity.

But it tasted all right: just like any other bread.

One morning soon after these events she sold a

wooden elephant to a pale shy young man, who had wandered vaguely round the bazaar until he saw her.

In fact, although of course she did not know it, he had wandered all over the establishment from department to department searching for her, after having followed her to the doors; and he had come down here to the basement as a forlorn hope.

"Yes," he said shyly, "that's excellent. I'll send it to a little nephew of mine at Weymouth. He'll be delighted with it."

"It is quite good," said Primrose, with a gay smile, "when you think it was made by those poor fellows"; and, looking at him, she ceased to smile; because she had a sudden and oddly uncomfortable feeling that the customer was not really a total stranger, but in some queer dreamlike way familiar to her.

"Ah, yes," he said, "poor lads, poor lads. Now I wonder if you would mind noting my name—in case I should want to write for anything? Merritt—Geoffrey Merritt"; and he also gave her his address, which she carefully booked. It was in the neighbourhood.

To her surprise he returned next day.

"Miss Welby, forward," called the manager. "Thith gentleman—you therved him yesterday with one of those carved elephants, and he wishes another of them."

"Yes, Miss Welby," said the young man, very shyly, "if you please—or perhaps a pig this time. A pig will do just as well. I'll send it to my niece. You remember me, don't you? I gave you my name."

"Yes. Mr.—er—Merritt, wasn't it?"

"Yes. Thank you. That pig over there will do beautifully."

And he took away the pig and left Primrose wondering.

She met him in the street after this; and he took off his hat and said Good-evening as he passed by. She had a sensation of his wanting to talk to her, of his intending to do so and then not daring. Evidently he was a great deal shyer than most people.

But next evening he did it.

"How are you, Miss Welby?" He had come up behind, overtaking her, so that they were walking on together with a kind of fatal naturalness. "The rain has kept off; but it's very cold, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is," said Primrose, in a tone as cold as the weather.

"But there are a great number of people about, aren't there? London's always crowded nowadays."

"Yes," said Primrose, in the same tone.

"The worst," said Mr. Merritt, "is when you feel all alone in the crowd. I often have that feeling. And I'm afraid you do too."

Without answering, Primrose slackened her pace and dropped behind him.

He turned at once, and spoke still shyly but with grave earnestness. "Miss Welby, please don't misconstrue my motives. I do beg of you not for an instant to suppose that it is vulgar curiosity that made me try to find out who you were. Believe me, only the most ordinary friendly motives——"

"Rather out of place," said Primrose sternly, "since we don't happen to be friends."

"Why shouldn't we be? If people can be useful to one another—above all, in these horrible times. Miss Welby, don't allow mere convention to——" And he

spoke with such eagerness that he did not seem able to finish his sentences. "I believe I could be useful to you. What you're doing at that shop isn't worth while—— It makes me indignant. The pay is disgracefully insufficient—not enough to keep body and soul together. Miss Welby, I was so sorry—so dreadfully sorry for you—when I saw you sitting all alone at that teashop. Why, I felt——"

"Stop," cried Primrose. The blood had rushed to her head, and instinctively she raised her hands and for a moment hid her face with them. "It was you," she said; "it was you who put the money in my purse."

Mr. Merritt said he could not deny the fact, adding that he knew he had taken a liberty. He too was blushing now, in much confusion, but war-time darkness prevented either from seeing the other's blushes.

"I know it was somewhat of a liberty," he repeated humbly.

"*Somewhat!*" said Primrose, hard and wrathful. "It was a great liberty—an intolerable liberty." Then her voice quavered and lost all strength. "I have spent it—but I shall pay it back to you, every penny."

"That must be as you wish," said Mr. Merritt eagerly. "By all means, a loan—if you prefer it. Only please don't be in a hurry to repay me. Not till it's altogether convenient."

"You're very kind," mumbled Primrose. Unconsciously she was walking on with him again. "I have your address," she added firmly. "So I know where to send it."

"Exactly. And, Miss Welby, you won't break off our acquaintanceship, will you? You won't be governed by that old conventional nonsense, and just be-

cause we haven't been properly introduced— Remember the times. The master of ceremonies has gone on other duty. I left him dressed in khaki, at the place I've come from—— In his absence, it is destiny that makes introductions.”

He went on talking, shaking off his extreme shyness; and before they parted he asked her if she would be good enough to come out into the country with him one Sunday, for a quiet treat.

“You will be as safe with me as if you were my own sister,” he said earnestly. “That sort of thing doesn't appeal to me”; and he made a gesture with his hand, as if thrusting away trivial or obnoxious matters. “I have two sisters—one married, at Weymouth, at our old home; and the other up here in London, working for her living, like you.”

CHAPTER V

ON a bright fine afternoon towards the middle of March, Jack Welby tramped across the high tableland between Bapaume and Arras, and came along a ridge to what had been the village of Beau-Séjour until the fire of friend and foe changed it into a heap of rubble and brickdust. His battalion was out of the line and he had obtained a pass for the purpose of visiting the Casualty Clearing Station—or C.C.S., as they called it for short—that was established between the village and the river.

All this was ground from which the Germans retreated early in 1917, and as they were never likely to come back again it had been organized in a wonderfully complete manner.

"That's right," said a medical orderly. "Wait here, Sergeant, if you please."

He stood there, the typical war-tried infantryman, in light order but with steel hat and box mask; sun-burnt and erect; looking four inches bigger round the chest than the sometime city clerk, and half a head taller than that dissipated Piccadilly lounge; carrying on his face, too, an expression that neither of them had ever worn—an expression slowly stamped upon it by nearly four years of patience and endurance. He stood waiting and admiring.

The C.C.S. formed a camp to itself; the large tents, like the ground-floor wards of a vast hospital, stretched in blocks or streets with new duck-boards for

family. Nevertheless, he could not take up the case. No, this sort of thing was altogether alien to the habits of his firm. Mrs. Welby must apply to a police court practitioner. Nor could Mr. Rolls offer any pecuniary assistance; he was very sorry, but the family, as Mrs. Welby should know, were already very much in his debt—for the costs incurred with regard to the bankruptcies and the settlement of affairs. Indeed, these matters were not yet settled; they were still “in the office,” receiving frequent attention, adding to the debt. No, Mr. Rolls had done a great deal for the Welbys, and he really could not do any more—not even a very little more.

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She came back after her elemental, instinct-driven excursion, hugging a loaf from which she cut an enormous slice. But she shuddered as she bit. For the first time in her life she was eating such food. It was the bread of charity.

But it tasted all right: just like any other bread.

One morning soon after these events she sold a

wooden elephant to a pale shy young man, who had wandered vaguely round the bazaar until he saw her.

In fact, although of course she did not know it, he had wandered all over the establishment from department to department searching for her, after having followed her to the doors; and he had come down here to the basement as a forlorn hope.

"Yes," he said shyly, "that's excellent. I'll send it to a little nephew of mine at Weymouth. He'll be delighted with it."

"It is quite good," said Primrose, with a gay smile, "when you think it was made by those poor fellows"; and, looking at him, she ceased to smile; because she had a sudden and oddly uncomfortable feeling that the customer was not really a total stranger, but in some queer dreamlike way familiar to her.

"Ah, yes," he said, "poor lads, poor lads. Now I wonder if you would mind noting my name—in case I should want to write for anything? Merritt—Geoffrey Merritt"; and he also gave her his address, which she carefully booked. It was in the neighbourhood.

To her surprise he returned next day.

"Miss Welby, forward," called the manager. "Thith gentleman—you therved him yesterday with one of those carved elephants, and he wishes another of them."

"Yes, Miss Welby," said the young man, very shyly, "if you please—or perhaps a pig this time. A pig will do just as well. I'll send it to my niece. You remember me, don't you? I gave you my name."

"Yes. Mr.—er—Merritt, wasn't it?"

"Yes. Thank you. That pig over there will do beautifully."

And he took away the pig and left Primrose wondering.

She met him in the street after this; and he took off his hat and said Good-evening as he passed by. She had a sensation of his wanting to talk to her, of his intending to do so and then not daring. Evidently he was a great deal shyer than most people.

But next evening he did it.

"How are you, Miss Welby?" He had come up behind, overtaking her, so that they were walking on together with a kind of fatal naturalness. "The rain has kept off; but it's very cold, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is," said Primrose, in a tone as cold as the weather.

"But there are a great number of people about, aren't there? London's always crowded nowadays."

"Yes," said Primrose, in the same tone.

"The worst," said Mr. Merritt, "is when you feel all alone in the crowd. I often have that feeling. And I'm afraid you do too."

Without answering, Primrose slackened her pace and dropped behind him.

He turned at once, and spoke still shyly but with grave earnestness. "Miss Welby, please don't misconstrue my motives. I do beg of you not for an instant to suppose that it is vulgar curiosity that made me try to find out who you were. Believe me, only the most ordinary friendly motives——"

"Rather out of place," said Primrose sternly, "since we don't happen to be friends."

"Why shouldn't we be? If people can be useful to one another—above all, in these horrible times. Miss Welby, don't allow mere convention to——" And he

spoke with such eagerness that he did not seem able to finish his sentences. "I believe I could be useful to you. What you're doing at that shop isn't worth while—— It makes me indignant. The pay is disgracefully insufficient—not enough to keep body and soul together. Miss Welby, I was so sorry—so dreadfully sorry for you—when I saw you sitting all alone at that teashop. Why, I felt——"

"Stop," cried Primrose. The blood had rushed to her head, and instinctively she raised her hands and for a moment hid her face with them. "It was you," she said; "it was you who put the money in my purse."

Mr. Merritt said he could not deny the fact, adding that he knew he had taken a liberty. He too was blushing now, in much confusion, but war-time darkness prevented either from seeing the other's blushes.

"I know it was somewhat of a liberty," he repeated humbly.

"*Somewhat!*" said Primrose, hard and wrathful. "It was a great liberty—an intolerable liberty." Then her voice quavered and lost all strength. "I have spent it—but I shall pay it back to you, every penny."

"That must be as you wish," said Mr. Merritt eagerly. "By all means, a loan—if you prefer it. Only please don't be in a hurry to repay me. Not till it's altogether convenient."

"You're very kind," mumbled Primrose. Unconsciously she was walking on with him again. "I have your address," she added firmly. "So I know where to send it."

"Exactly. And, Miss Welby, you won't break off our acquaintanceship, will you? You won't be governed by that old conventional nonsense, and just be-

tion column passing empty. Off went these waggons. More waggons were found for the nurses to ride in. The colonel gave his own orders briskly. Rendez-vous at Abri-des-Anges, a town twenty miles off.

The nurses were in the waggons, and there was a strange emptiness from the camp to the hillside; but down the vacant road dozens of wounded men still came staggering. Three tents were now on fire, sending black clouds of smoke across the waggons, and another big shell brought a cataract of earth and rubbish.

"Take those women away," bellowed the colonel. "Get on with you."

One of the nurses had jumped down from her waggon. "Put that man in my place," she called. "I can walk."

"I too, Nurse Welby." . . . "Here's another place, Nurse Welby." . . . "Mine too."

The nurses were all jumping down from the waggons. They helped to put the torn and broken men in their places. And, thus laden, the waggons moved off.

"Are those women gone?" roared the colonel, coming through the smoke. "Oh, hell, what's this?"

"We are marching, sir," said the matron.

At this supreme moment the plump short-sighted matron was really rather fine. Even her angry commanding officer could not make her hurry unduly.

"Fall in," she shouted, so loudly that her pince-nez dropped off; and she made the girls line up by the side of the road, and herself stood in front of them. "Form two deep." And the girls did so. "Form Fours. . . . Right. . . . By the right— Quick march."

And off they went, the matron leading, their high heels tapping on the roadway, as the first of the Germans crept into the empty space at the top of the village. The matron was soon out of breath, but she never lost her self-possession. They were badly shelled beyond the smashed bridge, and she crowded them into some slits of old trenches for shelter, and then told them to fall in again. It was as orderly a movement as any performed by regular troops in the evacuation of Beau Séjour.

So they marched, till their shoes were worn out and their feet bled, arriving seven hours afterwards at the town of Abri-des-Anges.

All this time Jack was fighting desperately, as a man fights when he has his back to a weak wall and knows that his wife is just behind the wall.

He did deeds with the battalion, and when that was swept away he did them by himself. At a certain sunk road he rallied about fifty men belonging to at least a dozen different units; in the absence of any officer he took command of them, organized a defence of the road, and held up the enemy with rifle fire. In a little wood on his right there were some other fellows who, seeing the road held, hung on stoutly; and the wood and the road together stopped the cautious Germans for many hours. It was a very useful stoppage, by which whole brigades benefited; and the honour and glory of it, if there had been anyone there to notice, belonged to Jack.

Quite at the end it was noticed—by an officer who suddenly appeared among them and took over command from Jack.

"Give me your name and regiment," he said, during a brief lull. "Welby—Sergeant Welby"; and he scribbled hard in his pocket-book. "I'm writing the strongest possible recommendation. If you survive this, you'll be decorated and given a commission."

"Take care, sir." The officer had put the book in his breast pocket, and he stood up.

At the same instant he was hit. Jack clasped his body as it fell, and while doing so a bullet knocked him over, and the two bodies rolled down the high bank into the roadway together.

They were picked up and carried away by the faithful men who had fought with them. Those other lads had gone from the wood, all chance to keep the road had gone, everything had gone; darkness was falling; the Germans were coming on. And yet these men still carried the two heavy burdens, at a trot sometimes, the heads dangling, the limbs all loose; both of them dead or they could not be so heavy, but not to be left if you were not absolutely sure.

In fact one was dead, and the other only unconscious. Jack awoke on a stretcher bed in a lofty lamp-lit room and asked where he was. At Abri-des-Anges they told him.

"But where is C.C.S. Number 172?"

He could not rest till they procured and gave him the information. C.C.S. No. 172 got away all right, without the loss of a single nurse. It was quite safe, somewhere in this very town.

"Thank God"; and Jack fainted again.

PART FOUR

PEACE AND GOOD-WILL



CHAPTER I

SINCE eleven o'clock, when the guns and maroons announced that the armistice had been signed, the shouting, the singing had continued; and now, late in the afternoon, the noise of the streets was if anything greater. A population mad with joy filled every main thoroughfare to overflowing; wheeled traffic was almost impossible; work of all kinds had ceased as if for ever.

But divided from the Hammersmith Road by a long passage and an open courtyard, Welcome House received only a faint echo of the joyous tumult, and its large bare common-room seemed a strangely quiet harbour of refuge to anybody who had struggled into it from the stormy waves of life that swept to and fro outside the gates.

At the moment there were only two people in the room, an elderly man and woman, and, as if worn out with fatigue, both of them were sound asleep. The old woman—from her appearance originally of the respectable charwoman class—sat leaning against the wall, with her apron over her head and her red toil-marked hands folded in her lap. The old man sprawled across a table, his arms outstretched and his grey head lying on them.

This Welcome House was one of several similar establishments founded by a philanthropic nobleman. As the name implied, it offered a welcome to those who most needed hospitality, the indigent and unfortunate.

Some slight charge was made for the accommodation, since it had been the scheme of the founder to benefit without pauperizing; the place had strict rules; casual night lodgers as well as the more regular inmates shared the use of the common-room, cooked their suppers at a stove that stood in one corner, and ate, wrote their letters, or read their newspapers, at the stout wooden tables. Beyond the cooking stove and the tables, the only other furniture consisted of wooden benches all round the walls. Late at night, when the room was full and each bench occupied, people sat on the floor or on the indescribable bundles that they had brought with them as luggage in lieu of trunks and portmanteaus. The welcoming abode could not be accused of excessive luxuriousness; yet, compared with the workhouse, it was the Ritz Hotel or Buckingham Palace. Habitual frequenters regretted bitterly the stern regulation that compelled them to vacate their beds and go out into the world from time to time. They would have liked to make the place their permanent residence.

"Hello! Got the shop pretty well to ourselves, eh?"

Two more people had come in; but, undisturbed by their voices, the sleepers never stirred.

Both of the new-comers were well known at Welcome House. One of them, Mr. Board, a flabby man with a squint, had once been a piano-tuner and he still hung on to the musical world, helping to carry band instruments in the Salvation Army, fetching cabs outside the Albert Hall, and so on. The authorities of the House looked with little favour on Mr. Board, although it was now said that he had turned over a

new leaf. At any rate it was some time since he had been in prison.

The other one, a middle-aged scarecrow of a man in dingy black garments and linen scarcely whiter than his coat, was Mr. Mordant. He spoke of himself as being "in the literary line"; but his profession was really that of a begging-letter-writer; he wrote begging letters for other people as well as for himself, charging a cash fee and a small commission on results; as now, he carried always a neat leather attaché case, which contained together with pens, ink, and all sorts of paper, his address books, his lists of benevolent persons, foolish persons, easily frightened persons, and the other simple materials of his not un lucrative trade. At Welcome House he was known as "the scribe." Nearly everybody there had a nickname.

Mr. Mordant put down his leather case, lit two or three jets of gas, and poked the fire, while Mr. Board with squinting intentness studied the aspect of the sleeping man.

"Strangers?" asked the scribe.

"No," said Mr. Board, "it's the old philosopher back again. I know him by his boots. Look at 'em"; and he pointed beneath the table, where the gaslight now shone upon a pitifully burst and dilapidated pair of brown boots under ragged festoons of trouser. "Those boots were made in Bond Street, and to order too. It was those boots that first made me give credence to all his yarns about having lost his fortune, and his wounded son stumping up for him so handsome last May. The owner of those boots has had money once and may have a bit again. He is therefore not to be counted out of calculations as a mere gas-bag."

"Perhaps you are right," said the scribe, with a grand air. "I will treat him civilly."

Then very soon the sleepers roused themselves. Mrs. Welby stirred, pulled down her apron, and looked about her with still sleepy eyes. "Where am I?" she said, smiling. "Oh, yes, to be sure. Oh, what a day!" And she jerked her husband's coat sleeve.

Mr. Welby awoke also, and there was an exchange of conversational courtesies.

"Glad to see you, philosopher," said Mr. Board.

"The same here," said Mr. Mordant suavely. "Been gadding with the rest of 'em, madam?"

"Yes, one must have an outing sometimes"; and Mrs. Welby laughed. "Directly the noise began Mr. Welby came and fetched me,—and, well there, I *had* to leave my work. I shall catch it for doing so to-morrow, I dare say."

"Nay, nay," said Mr. Mordant. "An occasion of public rejoicing!"

"Yes. So he and I, we've been trapesing up and down ever since—shouting and dancing too. I don't know what we haven't done"; and she laughed again. "They always say: No such fools as the old fools."

"A wonderful never-to-be-forgotten day, gentlemen," said Mr. Welby. "Do we yet realize it? The war is over at last."

"Yes," said Mr. Board, "the best of things must come to an end"; and he sighed. "The war has been a good friend to me. But I have never deceived myself that it could go on for ever."

Mr. Mordant sighed also. "Yes, we've hard times coming now, and we shall need all our courage to face 'em. The cry will now be raised to cut down expenses;

the circulation of money which has been so plentiful and beneficial to all mankind will be suddenly restricted. It will no longer be lightly come and lightly go. Every appeal for aid made by those feeling the pinch will be severely scrutinized. It will be especially hard on those who have passed their first youth. A gloomy outlook—a very gloomy outlook.”

“Gentlemen, gentlemen,” said Mr. Welby, surprised and a little indignant. “I don’t like this way of talking—I don’t like it at all. On this glorious day, in the first hour of triumph and victory! I call it, well, almost unpatriotic.”

“Nay, nay,” said Mr. Mordant suavely. “I yield to none in my patriotism, my love of country. Let me tell you, sir, that, as I came through the throng just now, I was meditating phrases of joy and triumph.”

“Ah, that’s better.”

“Phrases of victorious satisfaction, Mr. Welby, which I shall embody in—in the literary work on which I shall soon be engaged.”

While the men talked Mrs. Welby had gone to the stove and was beginning to cook some kippered herrings.

Now somebody else came into the room. It was a street flower-girl. She put down her huge basket, stretched her weary back; then she went across to Mrs. Welby, busy with the herrings, and said, “Mother dear.”

“That you, Vi? You’re in nice time.”

It was Violet. It was Violet, and nobody else, as a flower girl; not, alas, in fancy dress, but clothed and accoutred in the grim realities of the part; a battered black straw hat or toque on the back of her head, a

grey shawl round her fine shoulders, and fixed to her bosom by a gigantic safety pin; grey woollen stockings beneath the short rough skirt, and beneath the stockings a stout pair of men's boots that were as sadly in need of repair as those of her father.

"Had a good day?" asked Mrs. Welby. "I mean, got rid of all your flowers?"

"Got rid of them, yes," said Violet dolefully, almost whimpering. And she related how the exuberant crowd had celebrated victory by snatching the flowers out of her basket and tossing them high in the air, till none were left.

"And without paying you?"

"Not a farthing."

"Well, I do call that disgraceful," said Mrs. Welby sympathetically. "But, oh, my dear, you've got a black eye. Father, come here. They've given Violet a simply cruel black eye."

In spite of Violet's assurance that the injury to her eye was of no consequence, Mr. Welby expressed very great indignation as he and the other two men stood round her examining the dark discoloration.

"I cannot believe it an accident," said Mr. Welby. "It makes my blood boil. I believe some brute of a man has struck you."

"No, father, I swear you're wrong."

Mr. Board was squinting most horribly but smiling at the same time, for the comeliness of Violet pleased him.

"The young lady," he said ingratiatingly, "has not been struck to-day at any rate; nor yesterday either. I know something about black eyes, and without hesita-

tion I pronounce that eye as a week old. Am I right, miss?"

The entrance of the warden saved Violet from answering this question.

The warden was a burly, rather aggressive and yet not ill-natured person dressed in some sort of uniform.

"Who's had the impudence to light the gas without my permission?" he inquired.

"I," said the scribe. "Mine was the hand that broke a rule, good friend, to save thee trouble."

"You go along," said the warden; "and none of your nonsense. Now attend to me. I don't suppose we shall have anybody else in yet awhile. Can I trust you old stagers to behave yourselves if I slip out as far as the Broadway?"

"Run, fly," said the scribe grandly. "Leave us in confidence supreme. Play, laugh, and dance with the merry mob. We need not thy ministrations."

After the warden had gone the party settled down comfortably. It was pleasant to have the big room so much to oneself. The three men walked about, talking, and smoking some "gasper" cigarettes that Violet had brought as a present for her father; as well as the family kippers Mrs. Welby cooked some rashers of ham that belonged to Mr. Mordant; Violet sat by the stove near her, chatting confidentially.

"Prim still sends you the pound every week, mother?"

"Yes, dear. Never once failed. What we should do without it, I don't know; although it always seems like a drop in the ocean. Your father read me out an article yesterday proving that a pound is now really no

more than six and a penny of the old money. Goes no further."

"Has Jack been able to do any more for you?"

"No, dear. He and Amabel are just as hard up as we are. Prim's the only one of us that's any way prosperous."

"Father can't get work?"

"No. Not a sign of it. I've been lucky myself this last fortnight—washing-up in the kitchen of the Anchor Restaurant—two shillings per diem. And we shall be all right for a bit here. Couldn't you afford to take a bed yourself, so as we could be together again?"

"Too far off," said Violet. "I have to be at Covent Garden by five every morning."

"Poor Vi. I do wish you could get something more suitable. By the way," and Mrs. Welby became mysteriously confidential, "I've a piece of news. Remind me to tell you before you go. I've a suggestion to make in regard to it. But run and get some more water for the kettle now."

"Yes, mother," and Violet picked up the large metal can that stood beside the stove.

"Be sure you don't leave the tap dripping. It makes the warden so angry if he finds the boards wet."

"That young lady, if I may venture to remark on it," said Mr. Board, at Mrs. Welby's elbow, "that is a very fine piece of goods"; and he made gestures with his dirty hands. "Not only the face, but the figger. As attractive a bit as anyone could wish to meet. You must be proud of her, ma'am."

"She has had an immense amount of admiration in her time," said Mrs. Welby, with a gratified simper as

she turned the rashers. "But of course you do not see her at her best nowadays. I wish, Mr. Board, I do really wish you could have seen her in her ball dress or—— Hush. Here she comes"; and Mrs. Welby dropped her voice to a whisper. "She is very sensitive."

They all sat down to supper together.

"For goodness sake don't let us make two tables of it," said Mr. Welby jovially. "On this day of all days let us be friendly."

Truly they formed a strange assemblage in the gas-light, the Welbys and these two seedy ruffians; but none of them seemed conscious of or worried by the strangeness. They laughed and talked; for the time being, while the respite from care lasted, they were essentially happy. Mrs. Welby poured out the tea; Violet at her side handed the tin mugs; the flabby cross-eyed Board on the other side of Violet was thrilled by her handsome presence; Mr. Welby tapped Mr. Mordant on the arm, nudged him, and joked with him, as if he had been an old and valued friend.

Why had the Welbys fallen so low? Why had they failed with such completeness throughout a period in which all the world was making money? Perhaps their fundamental error had been that during the early stages of the descent they asked for a little more than they could reasonably expect to get. At the beginning, while the government filled its myriads of desks and stools with well-paid underlings, Mr. Welby was offering himself as a business manager, Violet was trying to contribute to a ladies' magazine, Primrose was attempting the concert platform; then when they applied for governmental employment, it was too late;

they had missed their chances, the descent was becoming rapid, all choice had gone.

Yet Mr. Welby at least should have acted with greater foresight, since he himself had once covered all this ground philosophically. A year before his disaster he had pointed out to Mrs. Welby how swiftly one sinks as soon as one loses one's place on the comfortable surface of existence. "You are useful and respected here," he had wisely said; "but you find yourself useless and unvalued there; and, try how you will, down you go."

And, what was so curious, he still talked with extraordinary sageness; as if able plainly to see the mistakes of everybody else, although blind to his own.

"My boy will never learn wisdom," he was telling Mr. Mordant. "A heart of gold, you know, but too impulsive. Won't stop to think—and, worse than that, won't let others think for him. It was nothing but this hastiness that led him into committing his great folly of last June."

"What was the folly?"

"Going slap out of the army with a sum down, and forgoing all future claims against the government. I grant you it was a temptation—a largish sum of money, but——"

"Does he retain none of that money in his hands now?" asked Mr. Mordant, deeply interested.

Mr. Welby said no, it was all gone, and Mr. Mordant's interest became languid.

"You see the position," Mr. Welby continued. "The boy had been badly wounded—despaired of at first—but then cured; only left with a stiff arm, which they promised to cure too, give them time. There he was,

safe in hospital down Haslemere way, to be taken care of for the rest of his life, if he'd played his cards properly—for you don't tell me, Mr. Mordant, that the government is going to forsake all these splendid soldiers oo've fought and bled for us. They *must* give 'em pensions—such as need pensions and haven't renounced their claims. His wife, a *good* girl, my dear Mordant—nurse out in France—highly considered—she gets herself transferred to home service, so as to be near him. There is great love between the pair. Very well. But this isn't sufficient for Master Jack. He tells his mother when she goes down to see him—twenty-seven shillings that day cost—he tells her he can't lie there idle. If he isn't fit to fight, he must work. A week afterwards he has committed the fatal error, and banged himself out into the world with the short-sighted money in his pockets."

"But his pockets are empty now, I think you said. What did he do with the money?"

"First and foremost he insists on putting his mother and me on our legs again—temporarily, you understand. He'd have done the same for his sisters—only they refused flat. Then next, if you please, he must sink his capital in a shop—and makes his wife give up her nurseship and the pay and the allowances that went with it, in order to help in the shop. I advised against, tried hard to put my foot down and forbid it. But, no, he can't listen to me. It was souvenirs and bric-à-brac—Holloway—and they put the shutters up precisely two months after they'd opened it."

"A pity—a pity," said Mr. Mordant, yawning.

"Mind you, his wife could have pretty near kept him by going back to her nursing, and *wanted* to do it,

implored him; but he holds to the high view that the husband must support the wife. Too late to change his mind now, however hard pressed, for her chances as a wage-earner have been taken from her by—well, by the delicate state of her health”; and with his hand before his mouth, Mr. Welby whispered to Mr. Mordant.

They sat long at table, but at last the party broke up. People began to come in from the streets; the room grew full, and so noisy that there were sharp reproofs from the warden.

“Why can’t you behave sensible?” he asked. “And why don’t some of you turn in to bed? You can’t want to kick up this row all night.”

“We may sing, I suppose,” said a hoarse youth, and he started *God Save the King*, nearly everybody at once chiming in.

“No, no,” shouted the warden, holding up his hands “Stow it, I tell you. We’ve had enough of that.”

“Miss Welby,” said Mr. Board, following her about in the crowd, “let’s find a corner, and I’ll sing *Down on the Swanny River* in a low voice, so’s he won’t hear me. I had a fine voice once. I’d like to sing to you. I’d like you to take a little notice of me.”

Violet excused herself, saying that she must be going, and she wanted to have a few words with her mother.

“I’ll fetch her,” said Mr. Board. “There, you sit there and I’ll bring her to you. I’d do anything to give evidence of the effect you have produced upon me.”

Then, when mother and daughter were sitting close together on the end of a bench, he stood at a respectful distance squinting and admiring.

At a table close by, the scribe had established him-

self and was doing business with a client. The attaché case lay open, suitable note paper had been selected, and Mr. Mordant, while he smoked the last of Violet's gaspers, dictated in a firm voice.

"When others are cheering victory to the echo I write with tears as a broken bit of wreckage of the great war."

"Hold on," said the writer, toiling painfully. "How do you spell wreckage?"

"Never mind how I spell it," said Mr. Mordant grandly. "Spell it your own way."

"I'd like to spell it the right way if I could."

"How dull, how stupid you are," said Mr. Mordant, with the sudden irritability of an author put out of his stride. "Cannot you see that I'm striving after genuineness, naturalness, which a mistake in spelling may heighten rather than injure. A man in your position isn't *likely* to spell correctly all through."

"Oh, I see now," said the penman humbly.

"Then go on"; and Mr. Mordant continued to dictate. "'Although I never had the honour of serving directly under your command, I knew you, sir, by reputation as a fine officer, a real gentleman, and a true sportsman.' Underline 'sportsman.' Full stop. New sentence. 'So, throwing pride to the winds, I make this appeal——' Comma. Dash. '——this heartbroken appeal.'"

Curiously enough, Mrs. Welby at the same moment was whispering to her daughter about pride and its abandonment.

"It's all very well, Vi, what your father says of being too proud to do this, too proud to do that. But there

are limits. I cannot see any harm in accepting help, if one can obtain it."

And she told Violet that on the long list of ladies and gentlemen who formed the new committee of management here at Welcome House she had discovered the name of an old friend of the family.

"Perhaps I ought to say a friend of yours, Vi, rather than a friend of ours. Mr. Carillon! Yes. More than that. He has been here, himself, to look round. The warden told me so. It was a fortnight ago, while your father and I were waiting our turn in accordance with the rules. What do you think of *that*?"

Whatever Violet thought of it, the news had thrown her into a great state of distress. She hung her head, she plucked at her rough skirt, she moved her heavy boots restlessly. Then Mrs. Welby made the suggestion at which she had previously hinted.

"Why not write to him, Vi?"

"Oh, no, never. I'd sooner starve."

"Then may I write to him?"

"No, a thousand times no. Mother, I should die of shame if you did"; and she clung to Mrs. Welby in extremest agitation. "Mother, promise me on your word of honour that you won't do it."

Grudgingly and fretfully her mother promised.

"It's a solemn promise, isn't it?" said Violet, going.

"Good-night, Vi," said Mr. Welby. He was the centre of a little knot of genial companions, and he stopped the flow of his talk as she passed. "Take care of yourself, my dear."

CHAPTER II

VIOLET had really been taking care of herself as well as she could, and had even gone to the extreme length of trying to take care of somebody else.

This was a weak little girl of fourteen, named Gladys, who occupied a very small space on the island of pavement forming "the pitch" where Violet with three other adults sold her flowers; and in Gladys—or Glad-eyes, as they called her—Violet saw the truth of a recent philosophic observation that had been made by Mr. Welby. "However great one's misery," said Mr. Welby, "one can always find somebody more unfortunate than oneself."

Looking at poor little Glad-eyes, and thinking about her, Violet saw that she herself had much for which to be thankful; since Glad-eyes possessed neither father nor mother, she was entirely alone in the world, she had a chronic hip-lameness and something wrong with her lungs. On cold days she coughed most painfully, but whether the sun shone or dark clouds lowered, she was cheerful and brave, patient under her own troubles, eager to assist other people in theirs.

At the pitch they made a drudge of her, reminding her that she was only there on sufferance, sending her errands, baiting her.

"Glad-eyes," Rufus, the man, would say. "What-cher playin' at? Get on with it, can't yer?"

"Yes, I'm a gettin' on with it nicely," said the child,

tying up branches of laurel with string. "On'y, don't 'urry me, please." And she laughed. "Most 'aste less speed."

"Gladys, ye young trollop," said old Mother Rowse, in her terrible gin-and-fog voice. "Off wi' ye to the vaults, and bring me a bob's worth of unsweetened. Here, take the bottle."

"Right you are, Mother Rowse," said Gladys cheerily.

"And here," said Mrs. Blood, "get me free pennuff o' peppymint drops."

"Yes, Emmie, I will."

"You dare address me as Emmie! I'm Mrs. Blood, I am. And don't you forget it, or I'll box yer pert ears off yer head fer you."

"Very sorry," said Gladys. "I didn't mean any offence."

The pitch was at the junction of two busy streets not far from the Euston Road, and with a heart full of pity Violet watched the frail limping little figure as it dodged through the traffic.

"Vi'let," said Mother Rowse, when the bottle was brought back to her, "do you wish a taste? You can have one if you like. . . . All the more for me then"; and she gave a horrible chuckle. "Emmie, you won't say no, I'm sure"; and with the bottle in her hand she paused to give a brief dissertation on etiquette. "I call her Emmie because she's my niece, but to others she rightly takes her rank as a married woman. And when I say married, I mean married—with her husband living though separated. I call you Vi'let—and shall do—because you ain't a married woman."

Old Mrs. Rowse was truly terrible; huge and fat,

type of a bygone era, an anachronism—the flower-seller of the Victorian age, almost able to touch hands with the bloated street viragoes of that still earlier period mirrored for us in Rowlandson's cartoons.

By comparison Mrs. Blood was refined; a compact stoutish creature with red cheeks and greasy black hair, fonder of gallantry than drink, bad-tempered without being hot-tempered.

"Did I see you giving a part of your dinner to Glad-eyes?" she asked Violet. "That's very wrong of you. D'you want to spoil the brat for us?"

But, undeterred by this warning, Violet took the child under her protection as far as she dared; also she begged the man Rufus not to be harsh and to use his influence to prevent the women from bullying her.

Violet owed everything to Rufus. He was a fellow of few words, except in the way of business, but he eked out his conversation with many winks and nods and nudges. Thus, seeing how Violet was pushed aside every morning at Covent Garden Market in the scramble of buying the flowers from the salesman, he gave her a nudge. "New to this game, eh?" And he winked. He taught her the trick of buying, advised her as to the localities in which to hawk her stuff, and at last one day told her there was a vacant place at his pitch. A young lady had met with an accident. "Got blotto," he said laconically. "Fell downstairs and broke her neck."

Naturally Violet jumped at such a chance; it is every flower-girl's ambition to pass from the hard struggle of street-hawking to the comfort and security of a regular pitch. She knew that she was greatly to be

envied; she was much obliged to Rufus, but sometimes a little afraid of him.

Although so silent when not professionally engaged, he could work himself into a frenzy and make a terrific noise when he considered it advisable.

"Flow-ers. All a blowing," he would roar from the island, and make the house fronts on either side throw back an echo. "Narse fresh flow'ers, lydy. Buy a flow-er, lydy. Come on, lydies. Show some mercy. Buy a pretty flow-er." So he shouted till the veins stood out on his forehead and his face was crimson, making Violet feel afraid of him in spite of his civility to herself.

And if the ladies passed by unheeding and there was no policeman in sight, Mother Rowse would utter dreadful imprecations; yelling after the ladies, assuring them that far from being ladies they were something very much less admirable.

Their best customers belonged to the other sex. Gentlemen going to the big railway stations on the way home to northern suburbs sometimes bought freely, and it was observable that a few of them made a point of buying from Violet.

"They fall in love with you," said Gladys, whispering to her. "I ain't surprised neither."

"Oh, nonsense," said Violet, blushing.

That these strange passing men admired her was obvious; and indeed, as if by another queer stroke of fate, she had never looked so handsome and attractive as now. She had seemed commonplace in her ball dresses, she seemed fine in her rags. As she stood there holding up a great bunch of foliage, with her dark eyes intent on a customer's face, with her hair

tumbled loosely about her ears, and her white neck rising firmly from the folds of the coarse shawl, she would have made a worthy subject for a bold strong painter's brush.

"Thank you," said the customers, "you can keep the change."

"Keep the change"—those words were so to speak the irrefutable proof of such successes, and, hearing them, two of her companions grew envious.

Little Gladys knew no envy. She felt nothing but gratitude and affection for Violet; she revered her, adored her.

"No one's ever spoke to me as you do," she said. "But you ain't like the others. All of 'em can see it. That's what's goin' to make it dangerous for you."

And one evening when they were walking away together she asked Violet not to be kind to her publicly.

"In private, yes; but don't do it on the pitch. Let me walk along with you like this sometimes—and hold your hand. Thank you. On'y, be guided by me and nag like the others on the pitch. If not they'll turn against you. And it'll on'y make it all the harder for me when you're gone—for o' course you'll be gone soon."

Although Violet was ignorant of the fact, there had been before her arrival some sort of tenderness between Rufus and Mrs. Blood; at any rate he paid her attention, moving her heavy basket for her, giving her a good share of their tarpaulin sheet when it rained, and so on; but he had now transferred these civilities to Violet. Old Mother Rowse liked as little to see her niece neglected as to see Violet favoured, and her resentment made her acrimonious. She croaked out

disparaging remarks as if to the sky; she pulled the pigtail of Glad-eyes without the least cause; and she was sometimes openly vituperative to Rufus, telling him that he had brought "insects" to the pitch, that he had shown the white feather in the war, that he had escaped from the army by eating soap, spuriously foaming at the mouth, and meanly pretending to be epileptic.

Rufus refused to be drawn into chat by such insults, he merely shrugged his shoulders or made a rude gesture. But of course all this friction rendered life at the pitch less pleasant for everybody.

Then, in her spite, Mother Rowse detected that she could best hurt Violet by hurting Glad-eyes, and deaf to protests she teased and bullied worse than ever. The thing culminated on a fine morning just a week before the armistice. On this particular morning Gladys came late to her work; she was coughing pitiously, and she endeavoured to excuse the lateness by telling them that she had a headache.

"All right, my lady," said Mother Rowse, with an ominous oath, "I'll attend to you d'rectly."

For the moment she was busy in arranging her great flower basket. To-day she had embarked on a handsome venture, sinking capital in the purchase of white chrysanthemums; she arranged this beautiful and costly stock with deftness, so that the massed blooms stood high above the basket rim, like snow or frothing cream; then she gave a contemptuous snort in the direction of Violet's basket, which had scarcely anything but evergreens.

"This way, kind gentleman. Here you are. Ain't they beauties?"

A customer had paused in mid roadway, and Mother Rowse beamed upon him professionally as she showed him her chrysanthemums.

The customer, however, after a little shilly-shally bought a branch of berberis from Violet.

"Keep the change," he said over his shoulder.

That was altogether too much for Mother Rowse.

"Come you here," she growled. "You was late, wasn't you? Now I'll make your ears sing for it."

She had the pigtail in her hand, and seating herself on her camp stool she held the victim firmly.

"Don't hit me," wailed Gladys. "I've told you I have the headache."

"No, don't you dare touch her," said Violet. "Let her go at once."

"Let her go!" spluttered Mother Rowse, almost suffocated by wrath. "Who says I'm to let her go?"

"I say so," whispered Violet; and, acting quickly and resolutely, she wrenched the old wretch's hands from the pigtail, and pulled the child away.

"Oh, oh. Ha-ha," cried Mrs. Blood. "That's a good 'un. You're to take orders, Aunt, so it seems."

"Cheese it," said Rufus.

"I'll learn her," said Mother Rowse.

She had risen, vast and terrible, and she stood before her basket glaring almost in amazement at the rash girl who had braved her. Violet, with cheeks as white as the chrysanthemums, but with eyes that did not quail, confronted her.

In this pause, of perhaps three seconds, Rufus merely put his hands in his pockets and watched. The inviolable laws of all the society that he knew precluded him from interfering at this early stage in a battle

between ladies. He could do nothing unless the rules of sport were infringed; he would promptly use all his strength to prevent kicking or maltreating a fallen foe; but till then—— Only all his heart was with Violet; every pulse of his body beat in hope and despair for her; he prayed for a miracle.

“There. You——”

Mother Rowse had clenched her fists, and like a flash she let drive with her right, landing on Violet’s eyebrow. Violet staggered beneath the blow, but recovering herself went for Mother Rowse gamely.

It was a grand rush, and she overbore her. By one of those uniquely precious bits of luck that come to grace a lifetime, Violet brought down Mrs. Rowse so that she fell sitting, right in her basket. The strong basket held her; she just sat there with her enormous loins jammed, struggling and cursing. Rufus and Mrs. Blood with difficulty extricated her and set her on her legs.

But Mother Rowse was vanquished. The fight had gone out of her; she could think of nothing but the ruin of the chrysanthemums and the loss of her capital. The whole stock was destroyed. It was as if an elephant had made its bed in a parterre—not a bloom was saleable. She wept.

And oh, how Rufus laughed! For a taciturn self-repressed man, how he talked and crowed and capered! To Rufus it had been the desired miracle, as well as the most excruciatingly delightful joke that he had ever witnessed.

Thus Violet got her black eye, from a female companion; and she was therefore quite truthful when she assured Mr. Welby that she had not been struck by a man.

CHAPTER III

THE ability of Primrose to continue paying the weekly allowance all this time was due to the fact that her acquaintance with Geoffrey Merritt had placed her in good employment at the large electrical works where he himself was engaged.

Her first care had been to refund the two pounds that she owed him, and until she had done this she felt great embarrassment whenever they happened to meet; but with the fulfilment of her obligation she soon came to know him better. Although well educated, he was of humble parentage; until the war he had been a science teacher at secondary schools; then, after serving and getting wounded in a signals company, he had been claimed by a government department as indispensable to the proper supply of electricity.

Notwithstanding his erudition he preserved his original simplicity and kindliness. Simplicity, indeed, seemed to Primrose the key-note of his character. He said the sort of innocent things that other people would have avoided as being altogether too trite: such as, "Why can't folk be kind to one another? . . . Why do they never seem able to look at life from any point of view but their own? . . . It is meaner for people to throw stones if they live in brick houses than if they live in glass houses, because then it is harder for the injured party to retaliate"; and so forth. But these truisms found an echo in the chastened heart of Primrose, and she therefore did not mind them.

His sister Joyce was rather a bore, and Primrose suffered weariness in her company on the rare occasions of their being thrown together. She was polite to her for the brother's sake; she liked and respected Geoffrey for being so fond of Joyce, and for not himself feeling bored by her.

She liked him, then, as well as being grateful to him. After distressing previous experiences she was most especially grateful to him because never in the very slightest degree did he try to make love to her. His manner was that of a friend, a companion, anything you like except a lover. And she thought, smiling to herself, "Of course there is no danger of that. My spells do not operate on the juvenile. If he was sixty-six instead of twenty-six I should have to be careful with him all the time, and this pleasant unconstrained intercourse would be impossible."

But their intercourse, though pleasant, was confined to narrow bounds. They walked in Regent's Park on Sunday afternoons; but throughout the spring and early summer she still refused to go with him for that whole day treat of which he spoke so often.

It was something he said about himself that made her yield.

They were sitting together on a bench in the park; two smart young men had just passed by with two graceful prettily dressed girls, and perhaps he had observed the eyes of Primrose following them. Anyhow he said all at once that he laid no claim to being a gentleman in the conventional sense of the word.

"But, Mr. Merritt, you *are* a gentleman," said Primrose, flushing uncomfortably. "One of nature's gentlemen."

"They don't exist," he said firmly. "There are natural ploughmen, natural stokers, road-menders, and hop-pickers; but there are no natural gentlemen. Miss Welby, there's nothing natural about it—any more than there is in the glaze on Sèvres china or the compensating balance of a watch. It is purely artificial, like everything else that means high finish, careful preparation, and delicate material."

"I simply don't know what you're talking about now," said Primrose, with a little nervous laugh.

But he would go on talking about it, turning his straw hat round and round in his hands; and while he talked she looked at him timidly yet attentively, as if determined to make up her mind what he really was like. Perhaps she had never considered the question before.

His face was all right, pale and refined, with a straight nose beneath a broad forehead; his nice dark hair was wrong, incorrectly managed, brushed forwards instead of backwards, or something; and his clothes, if criticized by the fashionable standards of that old world with which she had done for ever, well, his clothes were, frankly, awful—too much cut, too much lapel, too much pattern. But did that matter? Not a brass tack.

He still went on with it, in a tone of pleading apology that increased her discomfort; saying now that he hoped his instinct would always make him act decently, even chivalrously, but this was not at all the same thing as being a member of a caste claiming confidence and trust almost as their birthright. For anyone to affect to think otherwise was merely condescension.

This finished Primrose. The idea that after all his

generosity and kindness he could fancy she looked down upon him in any possible way was quite insupportable. A proof of good-fellowship became imperatively necessary.

"Really, Mr. Merritt, you're just talking rot—rot of the deepest dye. At this date of the world's history! Utterly absurd!" And she laughed gaily. Then, after a pause, "I say. May I change my mind about that excursion? I'd like to go with you. Yes, I think it will be topping fun."

Mr. Merritt's face shone as if lamps had been suddenly lit behind it; he was so very much pleased.

That first long Sunday was a glorious treat for her. She felt absolutely happy with him; her assumption that he merely regarded her as a pal, without any of the softness and silliness which she had grown to dread, made it all delightfully easy; she gave herself to the leaping progress of their friendship freely and joyously. They went far out into the Thames Valley; and Primrose skipped like the young lambs in emerald bright pastures, hopped like a bird across the moss and pine needles in the green dusk of a wood, babbled and laughed after the manner of the cool stream as it tumbled sparkling over a weir.

They had their luncheon in the open air and afterwards remained by the river bank, Primrose sitting deep in grasses and wild flowers, Geoffrey Merritt at full length looking at her face instead of looking at the boats, the view, or the sky.

As a racing punt glided by she lifted her hand and brushed the pretty stray hair from her eyes.

"I ought to have been a boy, Geoffrey."

"Oh no, Primrose. That would have been an irreparable disaster."

"Rot. No sickly compliments required between you and me, Geoffrey. I ought to have been a boy—all my feelings and inclinations are like a boy's. Somebody told me that once."

"Why do you look so sad all in a moment?"

"Do I? Yes, I felt sad. I had begun to think of somebody that I was fond of—my greatest friend."

"Your greatest friend!" said Mr. Merritt coldly. "How interesting."

"I hadn't seen him for years, but we had kept in touch with each other."

"Of course," said Mr. Merritt in the same tone. "You would not be likely to drop your best friend."

"He was in the army—at the front."

"An officer, I presume?"

"Yes, in the Guards."

"Oh, indeed."

Mr. Merritt abruptly changed his position, and, sitting up, for a few minutes looked at the boats instead of at Primrose. When he turned again, he saw with anguish that her blue eyes were all moist, so that they seemed to him like forget-me-nots seen through morning dew, and two tears, like pearls on ivory, rolled down her cheeks. Watching them he felt that his heart would burst. She was so pretty, so sweet, so unattainable—a creature of another world.

"Geoffrey dear," she said gently. "Now that we are such real pals, I should like to tell you about him. May I?"

"Oh, by all means. Please do," said Geoffrey, as if swallowing something in his throat. "I shall take it as a very gratifying mark of confidence."

"Then look at this." She produced an envelope from some invisible pocket and handed it to him. "Look at the address."

"Ah, I see you carry his letters about with you. Very flattering!"

"No, this is not a letter from him, but from a friend of his. I wrote regularly to Hugo—his name was Hugo Blyth. But of course I merely signed Primrose."

"Oh, of course, of course. Naturally."

"And you see how that is addressed— 'To Primrose, care of Mrs. Giles'—that dreadful house I lodged at. Really it was a wonderful chance that it ever reached me." She stretched out her hand and he gave her back the letter. "I want to read it to you"; and she unfolded the worn paper.

"First," she said, looking up, "I must explain to you that he was always laughing—*always*. He never stopped. Well," and she looked down at the letter again, "his friend, a brother-officer, begins by saying that he felt he ought to write, because he found my letters on—on poor Hugo. Now listen. 'We loved him for his unfailing good nature as well as for his gallantry. He was among the bravest of the brave. Although not physically fitted for such hardships'—He was very very small," said Primrose, with a break in her voice—"fitted for such hardships, he never complained. No matter what the conditions, he kept us all amused; and he died with a laugh on his lips.'"

Primrose wiped her eyes, folded the letter, and put it back in her pocket. "Don't you think that's rather fine, Geoffrey? 'With a laugh on his lips.' It—it justifies it, doesn't it?—what I told you—always laughing at everything—laughing at death too."

"Yes, dear Primrose, it was fine."

Primrose sat silent, looking over the stream; across flat meadows on the further shore, to where a low wooded ridge touched the infinite sky.

"Thank you, Geoffrey," she said, rousing herself. "Shall we stroll on now?"

In spite of all his efforts to shake it off, there was a cloud upon Geoffrey; he seemed preoccupied, and until tea time answered at random. But after tea he recovered his cheerfulness. The homeward journey was adorable. At parting Primrose shook both his hands and squeezed them.

"I have loved it," she said enthusiastically; "simply loved it. Do you understand? And I'm more grateful than words can say. I can never, never thank you enough."

Geoffrey mumbled his acknowledgments, saying they must soon have another treat of the same sort.

And in due course they had further excursions, almost if not quite as good as the first one; then towards the end of September still another was arranged. Primrose looked forward to it with eager anticipations of pleasure. But on the day before Geoffrey asked diffidently if she would mind allowing him to bring his sister Joyce with them.

Primrose was hideously disappointed, because the new arrangement would utterly spoil the longed-for treat; but, her better nature now governing her, she agreed at once. She said it would be delightful to have the company of Joyce; and indeed, now that the idea of a neglected moping Joyce had been put before her, she could not have enjoyed the treat without this incubus.

There was, however, no getting away from the fact that Joyce spoilt things, changing a day of mellow autumn sunshine into a long dull weariness. Joyce was heavy as lead.

And a little afterwards she upset Primrose badly by making a ponderous communication. She said Primrose ought to know that brother Geoffrey was in love with her.

"He will never tell you," said Joyce, "because he holds you so much above him. But I don't think it's fair of you to encourage him if you don't mean anything."

"I—I haven't encouraged him," stammered Primrose.

"Look here"; and Joyce became abrupt. "He knows what I'm saying to you. I told him I should do it. He didn't want me, but I felt it was my duty. And what I say to you is this: If he asks you out again it's your duty to say No, unless you mean to go on with it and make him happy at long last."

Before the week was over Primrose received an invitation from the brother. "Dear Miss Welby," he wrote, "can you come for an all-day treat on Sunday? You and I only—because Joyce has gone home to Weymouth."

Primrose sat in the quite decent little room that his kind assistance had rendered possible to her, and she hesitated for a long while, nibbling the penholder and frowning at the blank notepaper. The weather was still gorgeous. She wanted the treat; but, if she trusted that meddlesome girl, she ought not to go.

Suddenly she banged the pen into the ink-pot, and wrote: "Dear Mr. Merritt, I will come with pleasure. It is extremely kind of you to ask me."

CHAPTER IV

NOW then, now then," said the warden of Welcome House. "Hurry up with your grub, and let's put things as straight as we can."

It was Christmas Eve, and the common-room had been made gay with cheap decorations. Flags drooped from above the doorway; long festoons of artificial holly hung from one flaring gas-jet to another; and half of the end wall had disappeared under a red and gold placard which announced, in enormous capitals, "Peace and Good-Will." In the midst of these unusual splendours the numerous occupants of the room looked more shabby and forlorn than ever.

"Get on with it, I tell you," said the warden to a group crouching round the stove. "Yes, it *would* be fried fish to-night, of course—to fill the whole place with perfume. I give you ten minutes to finish."

Those not busy with their food gathered about the warden to hear his further remarks; and Mr. and Mrs. Welby, two haggard dingy paupers among the rest, listened attentively.

The warden explained that a party of ladies and gentlemen consisting of members of the committee and their friends were coming to inspect the building and satisfy themselves that its inmates were all comfortable at this joyous season. He warned them that they must all be on their very best behaviour when the nobs went round.

"Now do try to look like a happy contented family," he said. "That's what the swells like to see. Speak nice if you're spoken to, and smile otherwise. And listen to this, I don't say but what there'll be a bob or two to pick up here and there. But no cadging, mind that."

While the warden and his assistant set to work tidying the room, the Welbys withdrew to a remote corner and sat together on a bench.

Mr. Welby was exhausted after another long day spent in fruitlessly searching for work; his whole attitude betrayed dejection; he bowed his grey head and stared at the floor. Mrs. Welby close beside him put her hand on his shoulder with a sheltering protective manner, but her eyes were very sad.

"Now, father," she whispered, in as cheerful a tone as she could produce, "don't you go and lose heart."

"Mother," said Mr. Welby, with something like a groan, "I *am* losing heart. What's to happen to us?"

"Did you speak again to Mr. Tompkinson about giving us an extension?"

"Yes, and the answer was the same as before: Not to be thought of."

To-morrow was Christmas Day, and on Boxing Day the inexorable rules of Welcome House, framed without consideration of bank holidays, ordained that Mr. and Mrs. Welby must go out into the world and remain there at least a fortnight before again enjoying the benefits of the establishment. Go they must, although, as Mr. Welby said, they knew not where to lay their heads.

"Mother, to-night I feel like giving up the struggle. This is the end. It means the workhouse."

"No, no." Mrs. Welby shivered and then patted her husband's shoulder with a sort of hysterical gaiety. "Father, this isn't *like* you. Where's your philosophy? And where's your proverbs? It's a long lane, what? The darkest clouds have silver linings. Come. Jack may bring us a bit of good news perhaps."

"Jack!" Mr. Welby groaned again. "Jack's as hard pushed as ourselves. It never rains but it pours. I met him this morning with his logs o' wood, and he's almost out of his mind about Amabel. Do what he will, he can't get the promise of her being taken into a hospital for her trouble. And the time's not so far off. The poor boy said to me 'Father, is there any real charity or decent feeling left in England?'"

The warden, ignoring all protests, had opened the windows in order to blow away the odour of fried fish; and now a considerable outcry arose from various parts of the room.

"Oh, shut them windows, do. . . . Yes, for mercy's sake shut them windows. . . . Are we all to be froze?"

"Butchered to make a patricians' holiday," said Mr. Mordant the scribe.

Seated at the table near the Welbys, he was dictating to one of his clients the conclusion of a begging letter, and the draught from the windows fluttered his notebook and broke the thread of his ideas. "Sullen and oppressive jailer," he called irritably to the warden, "do thine office with some regard to the weakness of humanity."

"Oh, you go along," said the warden, laughing good-humouredly. "None of your nonsense, Mr. Mordant. There"; and he closed the windows. "You're like a lot

of marmoset monkeys at the Zoo—as though you'd all perish if you got a breath of fresh air."

Mr. Mordant finished his dictation. "It is Christmas Eve, when all those who have friends are making merry, and alone and neglected in my garret——"

"I can't spell garret."

"Never mind. Go on. 'Alone and neglected in my garret, I send you this appeal with tears, with tears, with tears.'"

"What, put that three times?"

"Yes, the repetition is both beautiful and affecting. Now dab a stamp on the envelope, and there you are."

"But half a minute," said the client doubtfully. "You made me tell him at the beginning I was penniless. How am I supposed to get the stamp?"

"A shrewd question," said the scribe, gratified by evidence of intelligence where he had not looked for it. "As you detect, it would be far more realistic naturalistic to omit the stamp; but long experience has taught us that the stampless letter arouses so much prejudice and hostility in the breast of the recipient that the effect aimed at is lost. Stamp it."

The warden and his assistant had brought in a harmonium, which they placed at the far end of the room near the stove. They were followed by Mr. Tomkinson, the secretary, a bald fussy little man.

"Good evening, my friends, good evening," said Mr. Tomkinson fussily. "Which of you is it who is going to help with the music?"

"Me, sir"; and Mr. Board came forward squinting.

"Good," said Mr. Tomkinson. "You had better try the instrument." And he clapped his hands loudly to

secure silence. "Now I want you all to understand that when the ladies and gentlemen enter you are to stand up at once. Then immediately you will sing *God Save the King*."

"Yes, sir. . . . We most of us know that tune, sir."

"I want you to sing it quietly but fervently, and with *reverence*—with the utmost reverence."

"Is the King himself expected?" somebody asked.

"No, of course not," said Mr. Tomkinson. "What a ridiculous question. No, I ask for reverence, because some of you may not know—or may have forgotten—that *God Save the King* is a hymn. It is simply a hymn."

"*God Save the King* a hymn? . . . Well, I never heard that before. . . . Live and learn. . . . All right, sir."

"If an encore should be required," said Mr. Board insinuatingly, "I could sing them *Down on the Swanny River*."

"No, nothing but the national anthem."

"One more word," said Mr. Tomkinson at the door. "Our visitors will pass freely among you, talking possibly to one or another, up and down the room. They wish to mingle with you for a brief space at this festive season, which should—and does—draw all hearts closer together than on other occasions. It is a very charming and pretty idea on the part of our guests, but, you understand, we don't want to see it abused."

"You heard his words," said the warden severely, when Mr. Tomkinson had disappeared. "It's what I've told you already. No cadging."

"Hush! Here they are."

The door had opened; Mr. Board scuttled across to the harmonium; everybody prepared to stand up. But it was a false alarm. The warden admitted not the expected grand personages but only two humble visitors for some of themselves.

"It's against the rules, your being present at such a time," said the warden, "but I wink at it. Yes, I'll wink at it, since the old philosopher expects you. But keep in the background."

"Righto," said Jack curtly.

"Here, my boy. Come over here," called Mr. Welby. "Amabel, my pet, very glad to see you."

Amabel sat on the bench beside her mother-in-law and they kissed affectionately. She was as pretty as ever, but her face had grown thin and white again; her eyes had an expression of resigned endurance, mingled now and then with the anxiousness that was symptomatic of her state of health; her old friends of France would perhaps scarcely have recognized in this shabbily garbed suffering creature the strong valiant Nurse Welby who under shell fire volunteered to march twenty miles so that wounded men might ride.

"You ought by rights to drink a lot of milk," Mrs. Welby was saying; "and a glass of oatmeal stout at twelve every morning wouldn't be amiss. I don't know how many bottles of stout I drank before the birth of Jack. Mr. Welby used to buy them by the dozen. But what's the use of talking about stout?" and she sighed.

She put her arm round Amabel's waist and they whispered confidentially, while Jack sat chatting with his father.

"So you've got a Christmas party," said Jack.

"They didn't want to let us in. Mab and I'll clear out in ten minutes. How are you, old chap?"

"Jack, I'm low—regular down on my luck."

Jack moved his stiff arm and laid the hand belonging to the other arm on his father's knee.

"Is little Prim still helping you?"

"Yes, bless her. But, as your mother says, it's a drop in the ocean. They won't let us stay here."

"Curse them," said Jack, under his breath. "They're all alike. Curse them."

Poor Jack was but the dishonoured ghost of that alert bronzed sergeant who waited last March on the C.C.S. duck-boards, or of the resourceful commander who gallantly held the sunk road. Availing himself of the lenient regulation, he still wore khaki; but his service dress, all soiled and torn, without regimental buttons or badges, hung loosely about his limbs, and the coloured muffler round his neck seemed ugly, incongruous, and decadent. He himself had a gloomy quarrelsome air that was very unattractive; he seemed to be a man smarting under a sense of cruel injustice and weary from a long course of misfortunes. He confessed that this was in fact his condition of mind when presently Mr. Welby reproved him for rudeness to a friend.

Mr. Board, after sidling across to Mrs. Welby, had bothered her with compliments about the family.

"A bevy of beauties, if I may say so," he whispered to Mrs. Welby, and squinted admiringly at Amabel. "Your young relatives surpass one another, ma'am. Good evening, miss. Pleased to make your acquaintance. Are you fond of music?" Then, finding Amabel reserved if not haughty, he turned again to Mrs. Welby.

"We haven't had the pleasure of seeing your daughter here lately—Miss Violet. Might I inquire why?"

Mrs. Welby, with some slight reluctance, explained that she had not any news of Violet. Violet had again disappeared.

"Disappeared?" said Mr. Board gallantly. "But not alone! Oh, no, let us hope that she has a congenial companion in her disappearance. In the case of such a singularly fine piece of goods, it would be too strange to disappear all by herself. Anyways——" and he bowed and squinted towards Amabel—"she has sent us a very charming substitute in her place."

Then Jack got up from the bench and tapped him on the shoulder.

"It's difficult to see," said Jack, with quiet ferocity, "whether you're ogling my wife or me, or whether you're giving an eye to both of us; but either way chuck it. Wash off. Get."

"Gently, gently," said his father, as Mr. Board slunk away discomfited. "No need to be rude about it, Jack. That's quite a friend of ours."

"Sorry," said Jack meekly, "but I seem to lose my temper nowadays. I—well, I'm fed up—and I begin to see red. When I think of Mab and all she's going through for my sake, I feel like smashing a plate-glass window or stealing half a sheep out of a butcher's shop."

"Oh, no," said Mr. Welby. "And speak lower, Jack. I think we are overheard"; and he glanced at Mr. Mordant hovering near. "Jack, has that lord you mentioned—has he answered about the ticket for Mab?"

"Not a word. Yet," Jack added bitterly, "I assure

you, father, I sunk my last vestige of pride. I wrote him a letter that might melt a stone."

"Pardon me for interrupting," said Mr. Mordant. "But it is a great art—the letter that will draw blood from a stone. It would be presumptuous for me to say that I possess the art, but if I can be of any assistance by giving you a few hints and——"

"Mind your own business," said Jack.

"But this *is* my business," said the scribe suavely. "In confidence, I have made it my business for a number of years, and——"

"Oh, go to hell," said Jack.

Mr. Mordant strolled away, and Mr. Welby again remonstrated.

"My dear boy, he is a friend of your mother's as well as mine. That's two of our best friends here you've huffed by your quick temper."

"Sorry. Father, I can't help it. We'll be off now. We've a long trudge."

"No, stay half an hour anyhow. For this reason, Jack. Among the people coming to look at us there may be some wealthy person with power to give you the ticket. You can but ask."

"Attention!" called the warden.

The committee and their visitors trooped into the room. All the inmates rose to their feet; Mr. Board struck a chord on the harmonium, and the song burst forth:

"God save our gracious King,
Long live our noble King!"

During the song, all eyes were upon the group of

fortunate prosperous people standing at the upper end of the room. By contrast they looked aggressively well nourished, well clothed, and well pleased with themselves. A big florid man in spectacles was known to old stagers as Sir Edgar, their governor and trustee; the stout red-faced lady was Mrs. Parminter, most active and indefatigable of all committee-women; a tall, white-haired man, a visitor, impressed one by the extreme, almost fatuous benevolence of his expression. The others, especially some young men who wore dress clothes beneath their fur coats, were nondescript, except for a girl with fair hair, pale eyes, and long neck, who stood prominently, a little way in advance of the main body. She had a nervous breathless manner, and throughout the song she kept opening and shutting her mouth, as if desirous of joining in, but too timid to make the plunge. Directly the song was over she spoke.

"Lady Augusta," said Sir Edgar, giving her her cue, "will you now say a few words to them?"

"The words I wish to say," said Lady Augusta, in a paroxysm of nervousness, "are very old words, but I hope none the worse for that." And she looked round with a sort of Joan of Arc smile, as though suffering torments, but too brave and good to give cries of pain.

"Those words which I wish to say are, as I hope you will all agree, seasonable words; and I think," with another tortured smile, "they sound better and nicer every year, when the time comes round to say them again. I wish to say," continued Lady Augusta, rather loudly and shrilly, "not only for myself, but the ladies and gentlemen who accompany me, from *all* of us, we wish you a very happy Christmas."

Mr. Tomkinson, the secretary, with his back to the room, clapped his hands energetically, and, accepting this hint, the inmates gave a hearty round of applause.

"I only wish to add," said Lady Augusta, faintly and gaspingly, "that I have brought you some chocolates." Then, boldly leading the way for her companions, she began to mingle with the inmates. One of the young men in dress clothes followed her, carrying a fairly large parcel, and as they moved to and fro, she could be heard repeating kindly inquiries. "Do you like chocolates? I hope so. Because I want you to accept this little box that I have taken the liberty of bringing. Quite a small box. Only a little souvenir."

One heard too, from all directions, little scraps of friendly talk between inmates and visitors. The visitors were asking questions and showing much sympathy and kindness. They also paid compliments.

"So tasteful, those decorations. . . . It is all very nice and homey. . . . Such a lot of smiling faces."

"Yes, that's what we desire to see," said the secretary as he passed swiftly hither and thither, watchful and fussy. "Like a happy contented family, aren't they?"

"Out of work, I am," said a blotchy young woman.

"That is the more sad," said a lady visitor; "since it was no fault of your own."

"My father," said the young woman, "was a collector of taxes. He is an angel in heaven now—and if he looks down and sees to what I've fallen, well, I should be sorry to think he does."

"I too have known better days," said somebody else, whiningly.

"Better days! If it comes to that," said Mr. Welby. "Excuse me, sir, but may I have *one* word?" He had fastened upon Sir Edgar, the florid governor, who was escorting two elderly ladies; and he asked him at once if by a special act of grace he might be allowed to remain in residence at Welcome House.

"Oh, do say yes," cried one of the elderly ladies. "I should so much like him to have his wish."

Sir Edgar looked doubtful, and the ubiquitous secretary intervened.

"There is the rule," he said. "I am afraid that rules are rules."

"Yes, there's the difficulty," said Sir Edgar. "You see that, Mrs. Melrose, don't you? Rules *are* rules."

"But every rule can have an exception," urged Mr. Welby eagerly; "and I do submit, Sir Edgar, that the case of my old woman and myself is a case where exceptions can and should be made. Mine is not an ordinary case. I'd like to tell you the hist—— No, don't turn your back, sir. Hear me out."

The secretary was drawing Sir Edgar away, but a middle-aged fresh-complexioned clergyman stepped into his place and beamed at Mr. Welby encouragingly.

"Then I'd like to tell *you*, sir, the surprising history of myself and my family."

"Don't forget," said the secretary in a whisper to the clergyman, "that one has to take all one hears with a grain of salt."

"I quite understand," whispered the clergyman over his shoulder. Then he turned to listen. "Go on, my good friend."

"You see in me, sir," said Mr. Welby, with emotion, "a man who has been worse treated by the laws of

this country—yes, worse, I do believe, than any man that ever lived.” Then volubly, but ramblingly, he narrated his downfall and subsequent adventures; telling the clergyman and the two elderly ladies how his poor little hoard had been swamped by the business obligations; how his own lawyers had let him down in regard to large claims against the government; how he had enjoyed gleams of hope because other lawyers had advised him that those claims were valid, that they only needed pushing, and that he ought if necessary to take them to the steps of the throne.

“But the throne is a long way off,” said Mr. Welby; “and its steps are too steep for a poor devil like me to climb. I don’t hope any longer. It was just their talk—that government and law mean justice, yes, and common-sense and fair dealing, not to mention mercy. No mistake about their *acts*. They turned me and mine out into the streets—would have taken the clothes off our backs if they could,—and we may starve for all any one cares.”

The visitors, listening with great politeness, were plainly incredulous. When Mr. Welby ceased speaking they glanced at one another and nodded their heads.

“Ah, yes,” said the clergyman, looking Mr. Welby full in the face. “Yes, the old story.”

“Do you say that to me, sir?” Mr. Welby recoiled as if he had been struck. “The old story!” And he repeated the words in a low despairing voice. “The old story.”

It was as if the words pierced him with sharp knives. Did he remember how he had once used those very words himself?

"Now I am going to give you this small present," said one of the ladies briskly, "in the hope that it may help you in your efforts to regain the position in society that you have forfeited. Half a crown! I wish I could make it a little more"; and she offered him the coin.

Mr. Welby drawing back still further refused the gift. But Mrs. Welby by his elbow showed such evident distress at the refusal that the visitor observed her agitation and presently gave the half-crown to her.

"Thank you a thousand times," said Mrs. Welby, taking it. "Oh?"

The warden had roughly put his hand on her shoulder and he prevented her from stirring.

"Now then," he said with the utmost sternness. "Cadging! Would you? I warned you no cadging."

"Oh, indeed she did not cadge," said the kind-hearted lady. "Not in the least. I offered it to her as a free gift."

"If that's so, ma'am," said the warden, "then so be it"; and, allowing Mrs. Welby to return to her husband, he went to a part of the room where too much noise was being made.

Jack and Amabel standing side by side were being questioned by the visitors. Jack, fortunately getting possession of the white-haired benevolent old gentleman, had asked him for a ticket that would admit the holder to a maternity hospital.

"Oh, surely," said the old gentleman, overflowing with benevolence, "that can be managed—yes, surely. One of these ladies?"

"She's pretty," said one of them, looking at Amabel. "Distinctly pretty."

"By the way," said the old gentleman. "You *are* man and wife?"

"Of course we are," said Jack.

"I mean, legally married?"

"So do I," said Jack.

"I had no wish to pry into your personal affairs," said the old gentleman benevolently; "but they are very particular at all these institutions. That's why I asked the question."

"Well, you've had your answer," said Jack very curtly; and Amabel pulled his coat sleeve as a hint that he must restrain himself.

"Are you fond of chocolates?" said Lady Augusta. She had just completed her round, and she offered Jack a choice of her last few boxes. "As a small souvenir."

"No, thank you, Lady Augusta," said Jack in the same tone. "I don't want a chocolate. I want a hospital ticket for my wife. She's about to become a mother."

Lady Augusta for a moment looked shocked or pained by these simple truths and plain phrases; then, after gasping, she faced them bravely.

"About to become a mother! Oh, but how interesting."

"Interesting?" said Jack, with a bitter smile. "Yes, that's the word usually applied to people in her condition. That's my excuse for trying to arouse interest. But so far she and I are the only people who seem to take any."

"Will it be your first?" asked Lady Augusta. "Are you recently married?"

"Yes, it will be our first. No, not recently. We were married when the war broke out."

"That was brave of you."

"No, it was brave of her," said Jack, "and foolish too. For this is her reward. I've dragged her down with me to this."

"Oh, dear," said a languid lady-visitor, with a gold bottle of smelling salts. "Another of these war marriages"; and she snuffed at her salts.

"He admits himself that it was foolish," said somebody else. "He owns he has dragged her down."

"And quite good-looking too."

Then in reply to questions Jack told them all that had happened to him, including his acceptance of discharge with a gratuity and the failure of the shop. If Mr. Welby was voluble, the words poured out of Jack like a torrent. He spoke loudly, and too warmly, as people are apt to do when they feel flames of indignation inside them.

"And since 1914, may I ask where you have been?"

"On the western front—till I was knocked out last March."

The redoubtable Mrs. Parminter, together with a hard cold sort of young man, had joined the group that surrounded Jack; and she soon began to question. But not until much of Jack's tale had been repeated to her by the others. They all knew it now and seemed to like repeating it.

"A war marriage. . . . Gave up his chance of a pension. . . . Ruined by speculation. . . . The wife is pretty" . . . and so on.

There were confidential whispers also. "I doubt if deserving. . . . Rather inexplicable. . . . More behind it than meets the eye."

"We wish, naturally," said Mrs. Parminter, "to assist you and all other ex-soldiers, as far as lies in our power. What are you doing now?"

"Selling logs on a barrow."

"You can't find yourself anything better to do than that?"

"No. Can you?"

"There is no need to raise your voice," said the hard man. "We are none of us deaf."

"Sorry. I lost my drawing-room manners on Salisbury Plain and had no time to recover them in France."

"Ah, yes," said the hard man coldly, "I see you like alluding to your service in the army. You are naturally proud of it."

"I'm not ashamed of it."

"But wasn't it rather imprudent of you to leave the army?"

"Not so imprudent as I was to join it," said Jack quickly and hotly. "That was the imprudence, committed by me and two million other fools—when I was imprudent enough to believe my country would be grateful to me after I'd sweated and bled for it."

"Oh, spare us that battered old stereo," said the hard man, with a frigid smile. "I dare say you did not exude more blood or transpire more freely at the pores than anybody else."

"Perhaps not. No more than you, for instance." Jack looked at the hard man's eyes, and then abruptly turned his back on him.

"What," asked Mrs. Parminter, "was your trade before the war?"

"I was a clerk in an insurance office."

"Why don't you apply to be taken back?"

"I have. And they won't take me."

"Really? I am surprised at that. I wonder why?"

"I had no claim on them. I had left them, rather hurriedly, some time before the war—believing then that my future was secure."

"Ah, there you are—imprudent," said Mrs. Parminter, shaking her head at him with a kind of playful reproachfulness. "I am afraid you've been somewhat imprudent all through."

"About the insurance office?" said the hard man. He had worked round to the front again. "Perhaps I could be of assistance in that connection. You say that they wouldn't take you back—but they had nothing against you?"

"No," and Jack laughed very bitterly. "Their other clerks had all been officers. They would have taken me back if I had been given a commission."

"But—I don't want to be unkind—but if after serving so long—doesn't that mean you had done nothing to deserve a commission? I must confess I see their point of view."

Jack stepped close to the hard man and spoke in a quiet but vibrating voice.

"Did you serve in the war yourself?"

"Oh, yes."

"As a soldier?"

"No, my services were judged indispensable for other——"

"So I thought," said Jack. "Then don't you talk about things you can't understand."

Then he raised his voice as he turned round.

"Are you going to help me or not?" he said loudly. "Lady Augusta, don't stare but do something; be a sportsman and help us, for old time's sake. Lady Augusta, you don't remember me, of course, but I'm Jack Welby. Stimulate your memory and help us. I danced with you and took you down to supper at Lady Rougemont's. We dined together with the Field-Larkers at Ranelagh; and you and I came back together, alone, in a taxi."

"Oh, please," cried Lady Augusta faintly.

"We didn't come straight home. We drove round——"

"Oh, no. Oh, no." Beneath this startlingly unexpected attack Lady Augusta collapsed. She gasped and shivered while the other ladies and gentlemen all talked at once.

"Is it possible? . . . But if so, how rude of him! . . . What things to say."

The surprise and the confusion were general; and in the midst of it all Jack let fly. He had lost control of himself, he said more wild and foolish things; he was ruder and ruder still. He frightened the visitors by his loudness and violence.

"We are not pitchers and sorners. Look at us. If I'm angry, isn't your inhumanity enough to make a man angry—yes, to drive a man out of his mind? That's a lie. I'm *not* undeserving. Oh, yes, you said it all right. I heard you whispering it to that sniffing woman with the salts. And this blighter—this indispensable crawling worm who insulted me—nodded his ugly head. I'll knock it off your shoulders if you do it again." The visitors were seriously frightened,

shrinking away, except the lady with the salts, who seemed paralysed and could only sniff feebly. "Look at my wife. She's a lady—a better lady than any one of you. Look at this woman, sniffing as if I smelt bad. I'll smell worse when you've all had your way with me, and I'm lying dead in a ditch. That's right, sniff."

The governor and the secretary had arrived. The clergyman was protesting.

"Such unseemly behaviour. . . . *Most* disgraceful. . . . *Most* disgraceful."

Then the discovery was made. "What! Oh, no? Why, these are not inmates at all. They are intruders—simply intruders. They are people who have pushed in out of the street."

Jack and Amabel were ignominiously ejected from Welcome House.

It was late now and the room was almost empty. Nearly all the gas-jets had been turned off, but the dying fire from time to time spurted out little flames that cast monstrous shadows of the old man and woman at the end of a bench, and made them dance upon the wall.

"Let's go to bed."

"It's what I've been saying for the last half hour."

But still they sat motionless, as if without strength to drag themselves away.

Then they slowly turned their heads at the sound of the warden's voice in the open doorway.

"You can't see them, ma'am. It's no good. I've got into trouble once already to-night."

But even as he spoke thus authoritatively, a well-dressed middle-aged woman pushed past him and entered the room.

"Of course I can see them," she said firmly. "This isn't Newgate that I'm aware of. Besides, if it was, you shouldn't stop me"; and she shook her fur stole and rattled her handbag indignantly. "There, put that in your pocket and don't talk nonsense." She gave the warden his tip, and advancing boldly towards the stove, called, in a voice that they both knew, "Mr. Welby! Mrs. Welby!"

Next moment she had seated herself on the bench between them and held a hand of each. It was Sarah.

"Oh, my dear old friends," she said with deep affection; "oh, my dear kind old master and mistress, oh, to find you here—like this! Why did you never write to me? Why did you never let me know? Why did you leave it to chance—to a wonderful chance really—that I was ever able to find you?"

They sat silent, dazed, while she reproached them.

It was an acquaintance of theirs—she said—a very old acquaintance of theirs who had given her the clue, and she had not lost a moment.

"Now of course you can guess what I'm going to do," she said, just as she used to speak to them years ago, firmly yet respectfully. "I am going to take you straight home with me to Hillside, yes, I am. The cab is waiting outside."

"Sarah, we *couldn't* so trespass," said Mrs. Welby.

"No, no. Not to be thought of," mumbled Mr. Welby. "But—ah—sense of obligation all the same.

Only—you understand—prefer to stand on my own legs”; and he broke down.

Sarah made strange noises, tried to laugh and only succeeded in crying. Then she dashed away her foolish tears, struggled with herself, and finally spoke with sprightliness.

“Yes, I understand, sir. I was prepared—for I know your pride. But now listen, sir. And you, ma’am. There’s no obligation contemplated by me. On the contrary. You’ll be doing me a favour. I needn’t explain—not to-night—but I’ve had an upset with my servants, and am fearfully short-handed. Oh, servants, servants!” And Sarah was very gay in tone. “Never speak to me of servants. The more of ’em you have, the greater your trouble. Well then, I want dear Mrs. Welby— If you don’t mind, ma’am, I want you to help me out of my fix by doing a bit of cooking in the kitchen.”

“Yes, yes,” said Mrs. Welby eagerly. “I should love that, Sarah.”

“You see, you know the range, ma’am; I always think that’s half the battle. And I’m sure the master will be good enough to take on any little odd jobs.”

“Yes, yes,” said Mr. Welby. “*Anything*, Sarah.”

“Then you save the situation for me, sir. I needn’t say we can find room for Master Jack. Of course. And I count on Miss Amabel to help me in the office, typewriting. I’ve a good room for *her*. Naturally, ma’am; for we want to make her comfortable—don’t we?—till all her little trouble’s nicely over.”

“Oh, Sarah,” sobbed Mrs. Welby.

“As to the young ladies—how *are* they, ma’am?—my two dears, as I always call them! Well, we can

collect Miss Violet and Miss Primrose to-morrow, can't we?"

"Oh, Sarah!"

"*That's* settled then. Now don't let's linger. Get your hats and coats, and come along."

PART FIVE

THE OLD SONG

CHAPTER I

MEANTIME what had happened to Violet? Throughout the month that followed Armistice-day her difficulties increased; twice she had been compelled to change her lodgings, being abruptly requested to leave because her room was wanted by somebody else; moving for the second time, she established herself at a miserable building in which Gladys shared a room with two other girls. Violet, pleased to be near the child, felt glad enough to find this refuge, but the great drawback to the place was that Mrs. Blood also lived there and Mother Rowse came as an occasional visitor.

Although the demeanour of aunt and niece had shown less hostility since the defeat of the elder lady, Violet knew well that they were her implacable enemies. They laid secret traps for her at the pitch, her flowers withered sometimes in a swift mysterious way, and but for the countenance and favour of Rufus she felt they would make life intolerable for her. Gladys told her that she was right in her judgment of the situation. "They'd do you in if they dared," said Gladys.

During the second week of December little Gladys fell ill, and came no more to the pitch. She lay all day on a mattress spread upon the floor, and of an evening Violet used to sit with her till Katie and Maud, the two other girls, returned from their street wanderings and unrolled their own mattresses. A doctor said she was suffering from the effects of a chill, and

her fever and cough were nothing to worry about. She would be better in a hospital, but all the hospitals were full. Her state was not dangerous, although of course there would be the gravest danger if she got up and went out; she was not, however, likely to attempt any such imprudence.

Katie, two or three years older than herself, was kind to her; and Violet did everything that lay in her power. The affection of the child for Violet was pathetic in its elemental character. For her, Violet the ragged and forlorn was a princess, a saintly heroine of a cinema play, everything high, noble, and glorious. In these evenings when they were alone in the room she made Violet tell her fairy stories; and, while she held Violet's hand and listened, it seemed to her that she was being lifted into some beautiful happy world that till now she had only seen faintly and dimly in dreams.

"I do love you, Violet," she said. "I don't believe there was never anybody like you. Katie and Maud, they see it just the same as I do. You'll give me a peep to-morrer mornin' as you go out, won't you? And you'll be here again in the evenin'?"

Then one morning, while Violet knelt at her side and the other girls slept, she whispered anxiously:

"I was waitin' for yer. I ain't closed an eye. Violet, that swine Emmie and the old devil are plottin' more mischief against you. Mother Rowse was in the buildin' last night, spreadin' tales about you. Katie heard some of it, and told me so's I could warn you. You beware, Violet. Oh, how I wish I was up and about. Then I could keep on the watch for you."

That evening what had occurred on two previous

occasions repeated itself again. The landlady told Violet that she wanted her room.

"Yes, I'll trouble you for your key, and not later than to-morrow night, if you please."

Protestations and entreaties were useless; and when Violet, like her father, spoke of the law of the land, the woman became fierce.

"I ain't afraid of the p'lice. Go and fetch the p'lice if you dare. This is a respectable house. Besides, I give you no explanations. I tell you to clear out."

Violet excused herself to Gladys and spent the evening in a vain hunt for another room. At the market next morning she told Rufus of her trouble, and after a long silence he drew her aside and talked to her in a manner that, for him, was strangely loquacious.

"Vi'let, I dunno. This p'raps is a blessing in disguise. It's something I've seen coming, and I've wrestled against it, not wanting further entanglements. But I suppose it had to be, and I'm ready for it."

Then he told her she could come to live with his widowed mother and himself at Rose-tree Court, where she would be well taken care of. Rose-tree Court was not only a charming retreat but most conveniently situated.

"It's very kind of you," said Violet; "but would your mother consent to take me as a lodger? Shouldn't I be in the way?"

"Don't you bother," said Rufus. "Leave it all to me."

In the course of the morning Rufus sent her home to pack her few belongings, guarded her basket while she was away from the pitch, and then, putting her in charge of his own basket, went to fetch her box

and carry it to Rose-tree Court. He had told her that all preparations would be completed there by eight o'clock in the evening, at which hour he would call for her and personally conduct her to her new abode.

Mother Rowse and Mrs. Blood did not display either surprise or curiosity because of these early comings and goings; nor did they appear to notice the profuse nods and winks showered upon Violet by Rufus throughout the day. They asked no questions.

At eight o'clock Violet stood waiting in the entry of the house from which she was banished. She had made more excuses to Gladys, but had told her nothing of the new arrangements, and she did not dare go into her room to say good-bye. She knew that the child would be very unhappy when she learned that they were no longer under the same roof. She would tell her to-morrow.

Punctual to his appointment her escort appeared; without a word he put her basket on his shoulder, and off they went. The night was dark and cold, its discomfort being enhanced by a drizzle of rain that began to fall after they had crossed the Euston Road.

The noise of the traffic dropped behind them; they were skirting the vague chaos of a goods yard, then they plunged through darkness under railway arches and he led her into a labyrinth of streets even more sordid and evil-looking than any which Violet had yet visited.

"Come on," he said.

Violet, troubled by sudden apprehensive qualms, had hesitated and slackened her pace. Was she wise in

thus blindly trusting Rufus? He had always been so good to her; he could not now mean to play her false?

"Rufus," she said weakly, "you told me Rose-tree Court was near."

"So it is," he replied.

"Rufus, are you quite sure that your mother is expecting me?"

He led her on without answering; and again she felt the sensation of coldness and emptiness that comes when one begins to be afraid. She thought that it had been wrong and foolish to give her box into his possession. And now he had her basket too.

Rufus himself was walking slowly; he looked about him mysteriously, as if anxious not to be observed by the rare passers-by. Then he stopped.

"Is—is this Rose-tree Court?" stammered Violet.

"Yus." And he led her across the road from the lamp-post where they had paused.

The lamplight had shown her the entrance of a paved court, horrible little sinister-looking houses with their fronts perhaps fourteen feet apart, and beyond these a vault-like blackness in which one could merely guess at further houses and the end of the cul-de-sac.

"Now you stand 'ere agin the wall," said Rufus, pushing her to the desired spot. "Wait 'ere, out of the light, where you won't be seen. Understand? I don't wish the neighbours to twig us goin' in. I don't want any fuss of any sort. I'm goin' to see the coast's clear. Then I'll come back and fetch yer."

"But your mother," Violet began; "doesn't she——"

"Look 'ere," said Rufus. "The old widow woman inside isn't my mother. I ain't got a mother. No, but I'm goin' to be mother and father to you, lass.

'Enceforth I'm goin' to take care o' you meself, Vi'let. See? Don't you worry. You're all right. Now keep quiet 'ere arf a minute."

And, nodding amiably, he disappeared with the basket.

For a few moments Violet's nerves failed her utterly. She leaned against the wall; her teeth chattered, her legs were giving way; fear, blood-curdling, bone-shaking fear had made her its helpless prey. Strength, thought, reason seemed to have gone from her. It seemed to her that she was snared, caught; she stood there trembling from head to feet, turning her eyes from side to side, spell-bound by terror.

Then the nightmare spell broke and she uttered a cry. Something or somebody had crept invisible along the wall and grasped her hand.

"'Ush. Don't speak. On'y whisper. It's me—Glad-eyes."

Violet clung to the child wildly.

"I've come to warn you. Katie got wind of it. I bin watchin'. Violet, you mustn't go with 'im. . . . That's a bad place. There's wicked people in there."

"I know, I know," said Violet in a frenzied whisper.

"Come away. Quick."

Then, at this moment, an uproar arose somewhere in the lower darkness of Rose-tree Court. The voice of Rufus was raised in wrath, and women's voices mingled with it. People, it seemed, had been waiting for Rufus down there; his friends Mother Rowse and Mrs. Blood had assembled the neighbours to give him a welcoming reception.

"Cheese it," he bellowed. "You let me and mine alone."

"Ho-ho," shouted Mrs. Blood. "This is a good'un, aunt. He's brought 'is fine lady 'ome to roost at last, and now he wants to 'ide her from the populace."

"Where is the trollop?" screamed Mother Rowse; and all came surging up the court.

The two girls did not wait for them. Gladys had pulled Violet along the wall, and they dived round its corner into another street. Gladys leading, still holding Violet's hand, they ran up this street, down that, under arches, through the alleys and by-ways of the intricate labyrinth, until, breathless and panting, they reached the lamplight of a main thoroughfare.

"You're safe now," gasped Gladys. "You must go on by yourself. I can't do no more." She had released her grip of Violet, and she stood with both her hands pressed against her chest, coughing, almost choking.

"Gladys, oh, Gladys—— You to come out like this, in the rain too. You're wet through. Oh, it will kill you."

"Not much," coughed Gladys. "But *they'll* kill me, among 'em, if they find I tried to interfere. Go on now, Violet. Get further away, while you can. I'll go back to bed and into the warm again."

Violet went on alone. The rain fell faster; she was splashed with mud from passing wheels; her hair, all plastered to her face and neck, shed rivulets.

In one of the squares near the Marble Arch she sat on a door-step under a porch, and slowly collected her thoughts. Rufus and those women were a couple of miles away now; cold blank misery took the place of her recent fear, and she began to cry.

It was the end of the world for her. Her career as

a flower-girl was shattered, she had abandoned her box and her basket, she was done for. She felt that, in the language of the ring, she was down and out. She sat with her head on her knees and wept.

The rain ceased; she sat up shivering, and she thought now of the only person in the whole world to whom she could turn for aid with any hope of getting it. He was in London. Yet she had told her mother that she would die of shame rather than accept help from him. But there was no one else.

High above her head the tower clock was striking eleven as she passed the church walls and came to the railings of the vicarage. She saw with satisfaction that there were lights in that well-remembered upper room where the curates and the vicar used to sit together, and light too showed through the painted glass above the front door; but no one came to answer her timid ringing of the bell. She rang again. Then at last she heard the chain being taken down and bolts withdrawn.

The door was opened by the very same housekeeper who had been there years ago. Violet had forgotten her name.

"And what may you want with Mr. Carillon?" said the housekeeper in reply to Violet's request.

"He is still curate here, isn't he?" asked Violet, breathlessly.

"No, he isn't," said the woman.

"Oh, dear."

"He is vicar," said the woman, with pride. "But if, as you say, you're in trouble, I suppose I must take

you up—for trouble is always the pass-word in this house."

She led Violet upstairs, opened the study door, and announced her as "a young woman in distress, sir."

Violet stood on the threshold, taking in at a single glance the unchanged aspect of a dozen familiar objects, the ecclesiastical chairs, the dwarf book-cases, the biblical prints in their black frames; cheerful with lamp-light, warmed by a good coal fire, curtained and secure, this room, which she had once thought hideous, now seemed to her quite beautiful. But the man she had expected to see was not in the room.

Its only occupant was an officer in uniform seated at one of the writing-tables.

"I beg pardon," said Violet, painfully disconcerted. "I thought——"

The officer had sprung to his feet. He stood looking at her, then came briskly forward. He was a dark, splendid sort of man, strong, firm, and very handsome; the face sunburnt, hard-set, the eyes full of authority.

"Miss Welby! Can it be possible?"

Violet dropped her own eyes, and stood before him, pitiable, dragged, trembling; for, although so incredibly different, he was indeed Mr. Carillon.

"My dear child, what has brought you here—and in such a state?"

"I was in desperate trouble," said Violet faintly. "I found myself all at once—homeless; and I thought—I wanted to ask you to give me——" And she faltered and her voice failed.

"Say no more," said Mr. Carillon, with breezy

authoritativeness; and he had an encouraging laugh. "Obviously, what you want me to give you first of all is a hot bath. Yes, yes. You shall tell me the rest of the tale to-morrow." While he spoke he had reopened the study door, and now he shouted down the stairs: "Mrs. Rudd. Here. Look sharp."

"Now, Mrs. Rudd," he said, when the housekeeper appeared. "Make up your fire again."

"Make up the fire again?"

"Yes, get the bath water heated as soon as possible. This young lady requires a bath. She will also require some sort of supper."

"Supper?" echoed Mrs. Rudd.

"*Supper!*" said Mr. Carillon, so loudly and crisply that the word sounded like a pistol shot in the still room, and Violet saw the housekeeper wince nervously.

"She will also require a complete change of clothing. Provide that, please, by the morning. Give her one of your nightdresses now. Get clean sheets and make up the bed in my room. Get a mattress and make me a shake-down on the floor here."

"Mr. Carillon," said Violet, "I cannot—I really cannot allow you to give up your room to me. Please don't——"

Then she faltered again and stopped speaking. Without looking at her, Mr. Carillon had held up his hand, and this gesture, as plainly as the most direct command, had said: "Hold your tongue."

He went on talking to the housekeeper. "You will attend to her comforts in there—you know what I mean, brushes, combs, and so forth; and bring me out

my odds and ends—my shaving-tackle—don't forget that."

"Why," asked Mrs. Rudd, "shouldn't the young lady sleep on the sofa downstairs?"

"Why? Because I say so." Mr. Carillon uttered these words very quietly, but the force and finality in them seemed more tremendous than if he had roared. "And also, Mrs. Rudd, because the young lady is very tired, grievously in need of rest, and therefore requires the best bed in the house, which happens to be mine. Now set about it, please"; and with another gesture he indicated to Violet that the interview was at an end.

Mrs. Rudd led her away. All her misery and sense of shame had been obliterated by her wonder. Watching his face, listening to the tones of his voice, she had thrilled to her inmost depths with the wonder of it. It was a dream surely.

An hour later she was in bed, in the room of which she had once caught a glimpse when talking to the vicar's sister on the landing—the room of the vicar. She was glowing with sensations of cleanness and comfort derived from the bath; she stretched her weary limbs in the delicious soft bed; cares, pains, and aches had gone from her as if for ever. She was in a kind of dozing ecstasy when Mrs. Rudd brought the supper tray.

"Here you are, miss—a nice basin of good broth and plenty of toast."

Violet sat up, swept back the masses of dark hair from her shoulders, and Mrs. Rudd thought that, now one could see her properly, she was a very handsome young woman.

Mrs. Rudd lingered, talking.

"He says you're to have your sleep out. I'm to bring you your breakfast in bed. Then he'll have a chat with you about noon."

"How good he is," said Violet.

"Good! I should think so," said Mrs. Rudd, and she gave a lengthy tribute to his goodness. "The whole parish adores him."

"Why is he still in uniform, Mrs. Rudd?"

"Because he's still acting as chaplain to the forces, as well as doing all the parish work."

"Mrs. Rudd," said Violet presently, as she drank her soup, "isn't he very much altered from what he used to be? Don't you see a great difference?"

"How do you mean, miss? I don't know that I ever took any notice of him before the war. Of course he's very different from the late vicar, who was nothing but softness and politeness: 'I should be obliged, Mrs. Rudd,' and 'If I'm not putting you out, Mrs. Rudd.' With Mr. Carillon it's, 'Now then. Look alive, Mrs. Rudd,' or if you seem to hesitate, 'Jump to it, Mrs. Rudd.' And you've got to jump to it too," and Mrs. Rudd laughed, as if even at her age she enjoyed this violent exercise. "With him, miss, orders are orders."

"Yes, that's exactly what I was meaning," said Violet.

"It's the army way, miss, what he's learnt out there. I don't mind it. I like a *man*—and Mr. Carillon's all that. Compared with him, the late vicar was nothing but a sheep—though it sounds unkind to say so, for he *did* mean so well."

Violet had finished her soup, and although sleepy she encouraged Mrs. Rudd to go on chatting.

"And it's only just his way of speaking, miss. Be-

neath it, in his *heart*, he's every bit as gentle as ever the late vicar was. Besides, when you aren't always being carneyed and smiled at, a friendly word and a merry laugh comes to you with all the more pleasure. As to his *real* kindness, in everything that matters—if you understand me, miss—well, his kindness surpasses any words to describe it. It's *do* with him, not mere *talk*. But you've had an example of that to-night, haven't you? See how he received you—giving up his very bed, and—— Oh, lor!"

Mr. Carillon was slapping loudy on the wooden panels of the bedroom door. He opened the door a couple of inches and spoke severely.

"Now, Mrs. Rudd, that's enough cackle. Turn out the light and let Miss Welby go to sleep. I have already told you she needs rest."

"Yes, sir. I'm coming, sir. I'm coming."

Without another word to Violet Mrs. Rudd plunged the room in darkness and hurried from it.

Next morning Mr. Carillon and Violet had a quiet talk together, and again she was filled with wonder, for once again he seemed different from what she had anticipated. That sternness or authoritativeness had vanished. He was still strong and firm, but more serious in manner, and once or twice, when he gravely smiled at her, she fancied that she could detect a great tenderness in the expression of his eyes. He was sorry for her. She understood that last night he was the man of action, promptly doing all that appeared necessary at the moment, doing it in the army way; now he was the man of thought, carefully considering the secondary aspects of her case.

She felt too, with a queer little pang, that the tenderness, if truly it existed, was caused by the broadest and most universal emotion. Not for her the individual, but for her the type of wide-spread suffering, did he feel sorrow and regret. Naturally he had long ago ceased to care for her herself. Probably he had forgotten that he ever cared.

The realization of this fact should perhaps have made her more comfortable, more at her ease; but it did not. She found difficulty in meeting his attentive eyes. She was painfully embarrassed, shifting her attitude on the pewlike chair, pulling at the folds of her improvised costume, feeling awkward as well as stupid, knowing also that her whole appearance was ridiculous in these borrowed housekeeper garments; for Mrs. Rudd was both much shorter and much bigger round than she.

Mr. Carillon made her slowly tell him the whole tale of her downfall, as well as that of the other members of the family. He asked many questions, and jotted down various facts in his note-book.

It was only when Violet came to speak of the poor little flower-girl that she recovered any self-possession. Then, forgetting herself, she spoke quite eloquently. She told him of the little girl's illness, her devotion, her reckless heroism in leaving her sick bed and coming through the rain to give timely warning. She said that she could not possibly desert Gladys; she must at all costs return; she must assure herself that Gladys had not sacrificed her life or been molested by Mother Rowse.

"It is dreadful to ask you so much," she said; "but I must go back alone, if you can't be good enough to

go with me. Oh, if only you will help me in this—to get Gladys away from those dreadful people—to place her in safe hands——”

“Yes, yes,” said Mr. Carillon. “I’ll see to that. I promise you, Gladys shall be attended to.”

“Oh, how good you are. You’ll take me there soon?”

“No, I’ll go by myself. Your presence won’t be necessary. Now please don’t cry. My poor child, I quite understand your feelings. But please dry your eyes, and just give me some particulars.”

And at Violet’s dictation he made some more jottings. Then he shut the book and smiled at her very kindly, but just as a grown-up person smiles at a child.

“So much for your young friend Gladys. But now the question is: What am I going to do with you?”

“If you could find me any sort of decent employment.”

“Yes, that’s easily said. I’ll do my best. In fact, I have already been looking round for something, and I’m hopeful of success. I will let you know about it by tea-time this afternoon.”

“I can never thank you,” said Violet in a very low voice, and she stood up, shaking out the folds of her short but voluminous skirt.

“By the way,” he said, looking at her, and smiling again, “you and our good Rudd are not exactly the same figure. She shall take you to the *Bon Marché* and get you some clothes that fit—whatever may be necessary. Only we’ll wait before doing that until we know just the sort of clothes that it will be advisable to buy.”

Violet flushed, grew pale, and murmured feeble pro-

testations of gratitude, in reply to which he made one of his commanding gestures. But then, in spite of the gesture, an impulse that she could not control compelled her to speak of the past.

Beneath the bronze of his complexion she saw a swift deepening of colour. "Is it worth while going back to all that?" he asked her.

"No. Only I want you to know that I think since then—I think I have changed for the better."

"Well," he said very quietly, "you could scarcely change for the worse, could you?"

"You are right to be severe with me," said Violet meekly, and she hung her head and looked at the carpet.

"Indeed, I did not mean to be severe," he said hurriedly. "I only meant, please dismiss all that from your mind. Of course I do not blame you, and I should hate it if you thought for a moment I was mean enough to bear malice."

"I am sorry," said Violet in a whisper.

He did not speak again, and when she ventured to look up he had gone to his writing-table. This second interview was ended. She crept from the room with downcast eyes.

In the afternoon, when she saw him again, he announced very cheerfully that he had found her a situation as second housemaid.

"So we know now the things to buy," he said gaily. "Print dress, black dress, caps and aprons."

Violet had inwardly recoiled, and she was shivering.

"What's the matter?" he asked, with a sharp change of tone. "Aren't you pleased? Isn't it good enough

for you? You're not too proud to be a housemaid, I suppose?"

"Oh, no," said Violet. "I am very pleased. Thank you very much."

What else could she say? Yet a hundred times she had vowed that she would sooner starve than enter domestic service; her sister too had promised her that no one should ever force her to wear a cap and apron; and even now, after going through so much, all that remained to her of pride was lacerated by this cruel necessity.

"It—the situation," she said faintly, "it's not of course anywhere in this neighbourhood?"

"Oh, yes it is," he said cheerily. "Close to your old home. The Cedars—Mrs. and Miss Castlemayne."

Again Violet felt an invincible recoil, a weak shrinking of the spirit. Of all houses in the universe The Cedars was that in which she would suffer most from her humiliation. In the old days, these Castlemaynes had always been the grand people of the place, whose civilities were tinged with a flavour of patronage; and although the Welbys innocently mocked at them, they were a little overawed by them.

"Well," said Mr. Carillon, "you have no objections to the Castlemaynes, have you?"

"Oh, no," said Violet.

"That's right then." And he told her how greatly his friendship with these people had developed—with the daughter especially. "Miss Castlemayne," he said, "did splendid work all through the war. She is not only capable and efficient, she has the rare additional virtue of being extraordinarily painstaking. In the parish she is becoming simply my right hand." Then

he wound up by saying that it would be convenient if Violet could get her outfit at once and remove to The Cedars that same evening.

Accordingly, after a late supper with Mrs. Rudd, Violet found herself driving in a cab up the old road past the brilliantly lit windows of what had been her childhood's home, and round a corner through the gates of The Cedars. The cabman carried her new tin box up the steps, took his fare, and left her.

She was received by Miss Castlemayne in the front drawing-room, the room where Violet and Mrs. Welby used to sit for a strained and uncomfortable ten minutes when paying The Cedars a call of ceremony.

"Miss Welby," she said very kindly, but in the old drawling voice, "I am so glad to see you again and so sorry at the same time—well, for the reasons that make you willing to come in this way. The vicar has told me, you know," and she displayed one of her lackadaisical smiles.

Violet noticed that she still blinked her eyes in the old silly style, and that she still had, as Mr. Welby once described it, the manner of "a dying duck in a thunderstorm." Nevertheless no one could deny that she was a well-bred, elegant, charmingly dressed girl, and, for anyone who was aware of her sterling good qualities and could put up with her affectation, she might prove both attractive and fascinating.

"Thank you for letting me come," said Violet, with an effort.

"Not at all," said Miss Castlemayne languidly. "How could I ignore such recommendations?" and she blinked her eyes and smiled. "In any event, the vicar's word is law with me."

Violet remained silent.

"And now tell me *which* of the two Miss Welbys are you? I remember your names perfectly—but are you Primrose or Violet?"

"I am Violet."

"Yes. Such a pretty name. But so is Primrose too." And then Miss Castlemayne with a good deal of tact explained that she and her mother would have liked to show their sense of absolute equality between themselves and the newcomer by treating her as what is termed a lady-help, calling her Miss Welby, and sometimes asking her to sit with them at meals; but after discussion they had decided that this would be impossible. The other servants would be up in arms, the whole household would be upset. "So I fear it must be Violet, *tout court*. Will you mind?"

"No, I shall prefer it," said Violet.

"Then, er, Violet, I'll introduce you to your, er, companions."

She led Violet into the hall, past the marble table on which they used to leave Mr. Welby's card at the conclusion of one of those dreadful afternoon visits, and onward to the top of the staircase that led down to the kitchen and other domestic offices.

"Edith," called Miss Castlemayne.

"It's Edith's evening out, miss," said a voice from the lower regions.

"Oh. Is that you, Daphne?" and Miss Castlemayne whispered: "Daphne is the cook." Then she raised her voice to its usual languid drawling tone. "Daphne, this is Violet, the new housemaid. Will you please take care of her."

With a swelling heart Violet went down the kitchen

stairs. She felt that it was the worst, the cruellest thing that she had yet been obliged to do.

At this same time Mr. Carillon, after many hours of active endeavour, was sitting beside a bed in one of the large comfortable wards of a west-end hospital. The white-faced little patient who lay in the bed was holding his hand and squeezing his fingers while she talked to him.

"Sure you don't mind what I'm doin'?" she asked.

"Of course I don't mind, Gladys. I like it. I want you to feel just what I told you—that you have got a real friend at last."

"It's what I've always done with Violet." And then Gladys said something that moved Mr. Carillon deeply, because he thought it contained such infinite pathos. "Oh, she was so kind to me, Violet was. But it don't do to have too much kindness in this world; it on'y makes you soft and unhappy when it's taken away from you."

"But it's not going to be taken away from you, Gladys. No, as soon as you are well again, everything will be jolly and nice for you—quite quite different from what you're accustomed to. Now you mustn't tire yourself with talking."

"I ain't tired of talking."

And certainly Mr. Carillon was not tired of listening. "Well, only a little more," he said gently, "and then you must settle down for the night, or nurse will be angry with me."

Already he had heard the other side of the tale. Gladys had told him of the endurance, the indomitable pluck, the heroism of Violet. Now she gave him little

intimate pictures—Violet sharing her dinner at the pitch, pretending that she was not herself hungry so as to persuade Gladys to eat; Violet lying on the floor and whispering those lovely fairy tales till Gladys fell asleep; Violet kneeling long before dawn, stooping, and kissing Gladys before she went to the market; Violet acting as the guardian angel of this poor little waif.

Mr. Carillon as he walked away from the hospital seemed to forget his military training; he moved slowly and carried himself almost slouchingly; he was deep in thought. He thought of Violet, the superb but worldly girl, working out her spiritual redemption in hardship and pain, rising higher the more bitterly she was tested, reaching at last to heights of unselfishness and nobility that all must admire. Thinking of Violet in this manner he yearned over Violet.

Then he pulled himself together, thinking, "Am I as big a fool as ever?" And he sighed. "Can five years, nearly six years, be thus obliterated in twenty-four hours? Just because I get another proof of what I always knew, that human nature *is* fine, that in all people there are latent qualities of strength that they never guess at till they draw upon them, am I to grow softly sentimental about it—am I to allow myself straightaway to become again as insanely fond of her as I used to be?"

Mr. Carillon determined not to be hasty. Once bit, twice shy. He determined, in the army phrase, to put Violet through it.

CHAPTER II

IT was nine o'clock in the evening, about a month after Christmas, and all work in the coffee-rooms at Hillside would have finished but for the lateness of one of its guests, a difficult and fretful young man. He sat alone at a table that had been hastily relaid for him, drumming impatiently on the table cloth.

"Is that soup ever coming?"

"Coming now, sir," said a voice outside the open door. "Mr. Jarndice's soup?"

This was the old dining-room of the family; and except for the new lighting arrangements, the small tables, and the two highly coloured staring oleograph portraits of the King and Queen that had taken the place of the photographs of Mr. and Mrs. Welby, the appearance of the room had not very greatly changed.

Mr. Welby himself now entered the room. Looking large and important in his second-hand suit of dress clothes, he brought the tray with a small plated tureen and a toast rack. He put the tureen before the guest, uncovered it with a sedate flourish, and withdrew to the sideboard.

Two callow youths, also in dress clothes, showed themselves and Mr. Welby whispered to them; a portly parlourmaid came through from the other coffee-room—the old drawing-room—and Mr. Welby made signs to her; a lump of cinder fell from the grate and Mr. Welby picked it up with his fingers, so as not to make any noise, then wiped his fingers on a cloth. Doing

all this Mr. Welby was extremely professional; and to anyone who had ever visited him at Knightsbridge, it would have been obvious that he founded himself on his own butler, Timesman, and in the minutest points was imitating the admired manner of that paragon.

"Soup's cold."

"Indeed, sir? Shall I send it down and have it warmed?"

"No, let's have the fish."

Mr. Welby spoke into a tube near the fire-place, and then took away the tureen and soup plate. What were his feelings as he moved to and fro, performing these menial tasks in the room where he had once sat as lord and master? At the moment they were merely irritation, because of the young man. The young man complained of everything; nothing satisfied him.

"If the fish is cold I shall go and speak to Miss Brown. Where is Miss Brown?"

"In the office, sir."

The young man laughed. "Yes, racking her brain to see how she can stick a bit more on the bills. The worse she feeds us the bigger profit she rolls up for herself, of course. She must be pretty near a millionaire, I should think."

"No, sir. Hotel-keeping, sir, is not what it seems. The expenses are so terrific. You may believe me, sir, Miss Brown would be ready to dispose of the entire business, if she could get anyone to take it off her hands." While he spoke Mr. Welby made a faint clatter with the two little plated dishes that he was putting on the table. "If she could see her money back again, sir."

"Oh, yes, they all say that. I'll tell you what Miss Brown is. She's a pincher."

"Oh, no, sir. I've known Miss Brown for quite a number of years, and I can assure you that pinching is alien to her character."

"She made me pay a deposit on arrival. Half a week's *pension*!"

"That, I think, sir, is usual nowadays—on a *first* visit."

"I shall ask for it back to-morrow. I shall go somewhere else."

"Oh, I hope not, sir," said Mr. Welby, speaking for the good of the house, rather than expressing his personal desire.

"I'm not being made comfortable."

"Very sorry to hear you say that, sir. Is there anything further I can do?"

"No, you're all right. It's the whole thing that's so dashed uncomfortable"; and Mr. Jarndice looked round the room. "Miss Brown caught me with her humbugging advertisement—'well-managed *homelike* establishment'"; and he laughed contemptuously. "Queer sort of home, eh? Queer birds that could see any suggestions of home in this apartment!"

"It doesn't strike me in that light, sir," said Mr. Welby, suddenly clattering another lot of plated dishes. Then he put one of them with a bump on the table.

"What's this?"

Mr. Welby consulted the menu in order to refresh his memory.

"Cutlets, sir, 'ar lar soobeeze!"

The young man tasted the sauce and made a wry face.

"Take this down to the cook and ask her to eat it for her own supper. Give her my compliments and tell her she ought to be ashamed of herself."

"No, sir, I shan't tell her that."

"Why not?"

"Because she's my wife"; and Mr. Welby made a tremendous clatter with the dishes.

"Oh, is that so?"

"That is so, sir," said Mr. Welby, violently suppressing himself; "and the best wife a man ever had."

"Sorry," said Mr. Jarndice, showing some compunction, "if I've inadvertently wounded your feelings." Then he laughed. "But you see what I mean? Affection and all that isn't *cooking*. When one's fond of a person one gets used to anything. I'm not married, but what I mean is, a person may be a very good wife but a dashed bad cook."

Mr. Welby hurried from the room and sought the aid of Miss Brown.

"That young Jarndice—you know, him that come yesterday—is going on so that I shall lose my temper with him."

"You mustn't do that," said Sarah firmly. "No, no. Guests are guests"; and she bustled from the office to the dining-room.

She looked very impressive in her black silk dress, with a gold chain and cameo locket round her neck, and by a few tactful words she put everything right.

"I am *so* distressed, sir, that you've found cause to complain of the dinner"; and she smiled insinuatingly. "But you must make excuses; for the fact is we weren't expecting you. It is a little late, sir, isn't it? Quarter past nine! And *table-d'hôte* at seven." And Sarah

nodded her head and became playful. "Well, we thought as you were so late, you'd fallen among friends and gone to some fashionable dinner-party. But now"—and Sarah was solemn and anxious again,—“now may I have an omelette cooked specially for you? It won't take three minutes.”

Mr. Jarndice was mollified, and said he would not give this trouble.

“Welby,” Sarah called, “a slice of cold ham. Then the sweets. And offer Mr. Jarndice some of the new Cheddar”; and she went back to her office.

Mr. Welby continued the service of the dinner, and a few minutes passed before the young man spoke again.

“That's quite a decent-looking girl sits in Miss Brown's office. Can you give me any tips about her? Who is she?”

“She's my daughter-in-law,” said Mr. Welby, swelling.

“Oh! And no doubt as virtuous as she is attractive. That goes without saying.” Mr. Jarndice laughed and then yawned. “Look here,” he said presently. “I saw them carting in a perambulator this morning. Does that mean you're expecting a lot of children here?”

“No, sir. Only one is expected.”

“Well, I shall clear out. Can't stand brats. When's it coming?”

“Not for some little time, sir. I think I heard March mentioned as the date, so to speak, booked for it.”

“Oh, that's all right. I shall be gone ages before then.”

"Hope you'll change your mind and prolong your visit," said Mr. Welby loyally.

"I say. That fellow you got to clean my bicycle must be a clumsy lout. He bent the mud-guard. Who was he? Where does he hang out?"

"He is my son, sir—and he comes to lend a hand of a morning."

"Bless us. The whole place seems worked by your family."

"We are here as it were temporarily," said Mr. Welby. "These are difficult times for hotel management. Miss Brown had trouble with her staff."

"Well, bring my coffee into the lounge. I'll go and stir up the old tabbies playing patience and see if I can't knock a tune out of the gramophone."

"Yes, sir."

As Mr. Welby passed through the brilliantly illuminated hall a visitor came in at the front door and called to him cheerily.

"How are you, my dear Mr. Welby. Can I see Miss Brown?"

"Yes, sir. I'll tell her."

"No, don't trouble. I'll go straight in."

It was Mr. Carillon. Lately he had come often of an evening, and he used to remain closeted with Sarah for an hour at a time, discussing some private business in which both seemed to be deeply interested. Mr. Welby's manner to the vicar was strictly professional and respectful; but Mr. Carillon insisted upon shaking hands with great cordiality and friendliness, and he refused to accept aid in taking off his military overcoat.

"Thank you, sir. Step this way, sir"; and Mr.

Welby opened the door of that little room where the family used to keep their hats and coats, their tennis rackets, croquet mallets, and other odds and ends. It was now the office. "Mr. Carillon, ma'am."

"Oh, come in," said Sarah. "One moment, Welby. Two more coffees wanted in the lounge, and be careful how you book them. I expect it's Mr. Jarndice standing treat to those young ladies."

Mr. Welby went on with his work. But the meeting with Mr. Carillon had brought back a wave of painful memories. He was suffering now. He thought of the time when he used to entertain that young man as a shy but welcome guest; he thought of those jolly friendly dinners, so unpretentious, so innocently gay, so anecdotally chatty, when he himself sat carving the wholesome joint, or stood up to do it, surrounded by all the bright happy hopeful faces. They were free and easy, quite without ceremony, and yet everyone paid him respect, honoured him, listened to what he was saying—even if he had said it once or twice before. And now!

"Well, Miss Brown. Well, Mrs. Jack," said Carillon cheerily, greeting the ladies in the office. "Busy as usual! Mrs. Jack, I saw your husband this afternoon."

Amabel, seated at her typewriter and looking extraordinarily pretty, had paused in her task; now she turned and set the machine going again. Behind her back Carillon gave Sarah a large and very unclerical wink.

"That's enough, Mrs. Jack," said Sarah, correctly interpreting the signal. "You go to bed now, dear."

"I'm not a bit tired," said Amabel. "Mayn't I finish?"

"No, dear," said Sarah, too honest to make further pretences. "Mr. Carillon wants to be alone with me. Go downstairs, if you like, and talk to Violet. She's down there, with her mother."

Amabel obediently left the room.

A wistful expression had come in to the face of Mr. Carillon, and he spoke hesitatingly.

"I didn't know Violet was here."

"She runs in for half an hour when she can. Do you wish to see her?"

"No, no. Or shall I?" said Mr. Carillon, hesitating. "No, I think I had better not. No, I won't," he said firmly. "I've no excuse. You know, I see her from time to time—fairly frequently."

"You haven't told her what you're trying to do?"

"No, not a word—not half a word. And I rely on you, you dear old thing, not to give the slightest hint to any of them. Jack agrees with me that it would be too bad to raise their hopes, until one was really justified. But now, Sarah—about Violet"; and he spoke with sudden enthusiasm. "*How* is she proving the stuff in her! Miss Castlemayne says she never stops working. They try to stop her. They can't. They say they never had such a housemaid in their lives. They say——"

"Yes, sir. Was it about Miss Violet that you wished to speak to me?" asked Sarah, and she had a mischievously shrewd smile.

"No, of course not," said Mr. Carillon, with his colour deepening. "I've heaps of things to tell you—all good news. I'm full of hope."

Then they talked together very seriously.

"And the solicitor gentlemen?" Sarah asked presently. "They're hopeful too?"

"Very much so. That stationary lump with the eye-glass, that tortoise, that limpet of primeval rocks—that Mr. Rolls—is really moving like a good 'un at last. You should have seen him frisking round the government offices with me yesterday afternoon. And the other fellow—Mr. Smart. My word, Sarah, Smart's the chap to make 'em jump to it. Smart's a real hustler. I take off my hat to Smart."

Then they talked of Jack.

"Sarah, I believe we're going to carry through Jack's little business. I had Jack at the War Office this afternoon, and Sir George Brace gave us every reason to hope. Sir George is Miss Castlemayne's uncle, you know. See how every little helps."

Then Mr. Carillon had a quite exuberant outburst of joyousness and enthusiasm.

"Sarah, my dear old girl, it's good to be alive; for say what you will, how wonderful, how splendid life is!"

"And so it is, sir."

"So interesting, so full of romance. Every day, every hour of it, is crowded with such strange chances—each little thing leading to another, and all leading the *right* way, if you have the courage to do and the faith to believe. It beats me, Sarah, how even the irreligious people can think that we men and women are just the playthings of destiny."

"Oh, it don't do to take notice of the rubbish some folk will tell you," said Sarah sagely.

"If we are puppets, we are not puppets on *strings*,

Sarah. We're free, all the time. There's nothing we can't do—yes, we're giants, our powers have no limits, so long as we spend our lives in faithful service. That's why it's so awfully jolly when you see your way to do other people a good turn—and why all difficulties seem to disappear like magic when you cease to think about yourself and are only trying to help some one else."

"That's true too," said Sarah.

"May I smoke?" asked Carillon abruptly; rather in the tone of a man who feels he has made a rhetorical flight and is glad to land on commonplace ground again.

He lit a battered wooden pipe, and, puffing at it with much satisfaction, ran over again the series of little chances that were now leading to the establishment of Jack Welby's title to recognition from a grateful country for a feat of arms performed by him nearly a year ago.

The first chance was when an unhappy bereaved lady in the north of England showed to a visiting clergyman the blood-stained pocket-book that had been found upon the dead body of her husband. The clergyman, struck by the importance to a certain Sergeant Welby, if still alive, of the strong recommendation on a leaf of the pocket-book, had caused advertisements to be put in newspapers; and perhaps the luckiest chance of all was that Jack himself happened to see one of these advertisements. A further good chance was the finding of an officer who had been in that little wood and had seen Jack's defence of the sunk road. From this officer to a brigadier and to a divisional commander were easy steps. Then came the surprisingly good chance that

Carillon, during one of his many visits to the War Office, tumbled upon a room presided over by a certain Colonel Adolphus Faring, who at once declared himself as a personal friend of Jack's.

"Faring—you don't know the name, do you, Sarah?—Faring has been enormously useful. It appears that his wife—she was a Miss Quartz—did you ever hear that name?—is as much interested as Faring himself. More so, perhaps." And Mr. Carillon laughed. "Between you and me, from the way she has kept Colonel Adolphus up to the mark, I rather suspect she must have been more or less the victim of Jack's well-known charm of manner."

"I shouldn't be surprised," said Sarah.

"Then a certain Lady Augusta—I forget her other name;—but, anyhow, this Lady Augusta has come into it somehow and is very active indeed. Her father knows Miss Castlemayne's uncle. Yes," and Carillon laughed again, "I can tell you we're pulling *some* wires for Mr. Jack, and I honestly believe we shall do the trick for him."

While Sarah and the vicar talked thus, Mr. Welby had carried the three coffees to the lounge.

To get there he passed through the old verandah, which was now solidly cased in woodwork and formed part of a long corridor leading to the two next houses. With art curtains, basket chairs, and electric lamps in pink paper, the corridor had a very gay and tasteful effect. From the lounge itself, which consisted of the ground floor rooms of the middle house with all the walls removed, there came forth to meet Mr. Welby a loud chorus of laughter, voices, and music.

Then, as he entered, the noisy gramophone stopped playing.

"And ye'll not start it again," said a bearded elderly man. "My wife has already expressed to ye her strong objection to it."

"Oh, come," said Mr. Jarndice gaily. "The greatest good for the greatest number. Let's see if the ayes have it or the noes have it. Ladies and gentlemen, hands up for another tune"; and, laughing, he began to turn the handle of the machine.

"No, no. I protest," said the bearded gentleman.

Two vividly provincial young ladies with circlets of coloured ribbon binding ringlets to their ears and foreheads were hanging about Mr. Jarndice, encouraging him, egging him on.

"Miss Spool wants some more," he cried triumphantly. "So does Miss Mills."

Miss Spool and Miss Mills giggled delightedly. They said they adored the gramophone; one of them even nudging Mr. Jarndice to increase his recklessness.

But the elder ladies with shawls, who wished to play patience or read novels or count the stitches of their knitting, over-ruled the young people. They had had enough of the gramophone. Mrs. Dormer, the oldest lady present, very sensibly suggested that the gramophone should be taken into another apartment; then everybody could be satisfied.

And so the matter arranged itself. Mr. Welby was told to take his tray back into the coffee-room; Mr. Jarndice and the two noisy laughing girls themselves moved the gramophone and fixed it on the sideboard. With much lively chaff now that they were away from observation, they drank their coffee and then clustered

round the instrument, sorting the records and seeking for something new.

Mr. Welby stood at a little distance, watching them but not thinking about them; lost really, wandering far into the past. Miss Spool, noticing him, laughed and whispered to Miss Mills.

"The old waiter wants to hear a tune. But pretty cool, his standing there like that without permission, what?"

Young Mr. Jarndice, adjusting a record, glanced round, saw Mr. Welby's rapt expression, and laughed too.

"Here we are," he said, manipulating the instrument; "Madame Clara Butt: English Song Series. . . . Oh, bless us. What a chestnut."

The gramophone was crackling and spluttering in the too familiar prelude. Then the glorious contralto voice rolled forth voluminously and sweetly:

"'Mid pleasures and palaces though we may roam,
Be it ever so humble there's no place like home. . . ."

The voice went thrilling on:

"Home, home, sweet sweet home. . . ."

The voice ceased, and after sounds of clockwork running down silence filled the room.

Mr. Welby had been overwhelmed. One of the girls, looking round at him, broke the silence with a loud laugh. He was gulping, shaking, wiping his eyes.

"Yes, look at him," whispered the other girl. "I believe he must have had a drop."

And they all three laughed gaily.

"What's upsetting you, waiter? What is it?"

"I beg pardon, sir," said Mr. Welby, pulling himself

together. "But that has always seemed to me a very beautiful and affecting song—both the music and the words. And for private reasons, hearing it on this spot, unexpectedly, well, I was quite affected. . . . Do I book the coffees to you, sir? Thank you."

Then he collected the cups and carried them out on his tray, imitating Timesman again.

CHAPTER III

BELOW stairs at The Cedars all her fellow-servants told Violet that the vicar and Miss Castlemayne were going to make a match of it; they said, "Believe me, Violet, she has been at it for years, but now she'll bring it off"; and Violet of course believed. How could she do otherwise? Had not the vicar himself told her that he was beginning to regard Miss Castlemayne as his right hand, and had not the young lady declared with an affected but significant smile that for her the vicar's word was law?

Only the head house maid, Prudence, a dry grey old maid, threw doubt on Miss Castlemayne's triumphant success.

"There's many a slip between the cup and the lip," said Prudence; "and of all birds, church-birds are the hardest to put salt on their tails. I don't deny she's *trying*; but didn't she try for her cousin the Captain? And nothing came of that, did it?"

"She only tried for her cousin because Mr. Carillon was out of the way," said Edith the parlourmaid; and she gave a sigh. "I shouldn't mind, if I thought she was good enough for him. But she *isn't*, and it's no use pretending she is."

Violet was entirely of this opinion.

Old Prudence chuckled. "I don't know why you should fret about it, Edith. You can't hardly expect that he'll come downstairs to look for a wife in the servants' hall, can you?"

"No," said Edith, sighing more heavily than before.

Violet sighed too, but inwardly, inaudibly. They little knew how cruelly these idle words had stung her.

When she cleaned Miss Castlemayne's boudoir on the first floor every morning she used to see all the parish papers in masses upon the inlaid writing-table; she picked up some of them, and fingered them. She daily scrutinized Miss Castlemayne's large memorandum block, and scarcely ever without finding an entry that disturbed her strangely, such as: "The vicar says more physical exercises and less dancing at the evening school"; or "Five-thirty. To meet vicar at the church club"; or "The vicar will look in here before vespers." There was a framed photograph of him—a group of the Girls' Brigade, with him in the middle. Violet picked this up too, held it a long time in her hand as she dusted it very slowly and gently with the lightest of her feather brushes.

It was in this room that Miss Castlemayne generally received him when he called to discuss parish business. Violet used to think of them sitting here at the desk side by side, close together probably, while she put the papers before him, and drawled and blinked, touching his hand perhaps every now and then, as if inadvertently, all among the papers. He would be just giving her his orders; grandly and authoritatively; telling her what to do and what not to do, in regard to district-visiting, the mothers' meetings, and every other intensely fascinating detail of the parish work.

While he was in the house Violet could not keep still. She roamed wildly about the upper floors; although it was late in the afternoon, she set to work again. There was really no work to do; but she

banged open the door of the housemaids' cupboard, brought out her things, and cleaned the bathroom for the second time that day.

Edith had run up to tell her he was here.

"I let him in," said Edith, rolling her eyes and holding her hand to her bosom as if to check the beating of her heart. "He gave me one look, Violet. Oh, it was almost more than I could bear. But I must run down now, or I may miss the chance of letting him out."

Violet gave a bitter little laugh. "You needn't hurry, Edith. He'll be in there with her for ages yet."

"Yes, that's true. She'll spin it out, you bet. I don't blame her either. Violet, what do you think they say to each other all the time? Do you suppose he kisses her?"

"I'm sure I don't know—or care either"; and Violet scrubbed the bath with almost maniacal force.

"I care," said Edith desperately. "It drives me frantic to think about. There. They've opened the door"; and she dashed downstairs.

Violet cared too—most dreadfully. She suffered torments during these visits of the vicar; it was only by her frenzied labours that she could anyhow tranquillize herself. And all the while she was wondering whether he would have her fetched and say a few words to her. They summoned her as a rule at the end of the visit.

"But he won't do it to-day," she said to herself. "He won't have *time*;" and her eyes flashed and her hands trembled. "Merciful powers, he has been in there forty minutes already. What *can* they be doing? Where's that old fool, Mrs. Castlemayne? Why

doesn't she go and join them? Engaged or not, I don't think it's very good form leaving them alone always and for ever. Mother would never have done a thing like that."

Then when she was sent for, when she heard Miss Castlemayne's voice calling for her, she hid. She who had once been so self-possessed, so majestic, felt as shy and perturbed as a child.

"Violet. Violet." Edith was seeking her. "Lucky girl. You're wanted down in the hall. He gave me another look."

Violet went down to the hall and stood there with her bare fore-arms and tucked up apron; her face was glowing, her eyelids drooped, she did not seem to see that he had intended to shake hands.

Miss Castlemayne, in a graceful attitude by the marble table, spoke of her encouragingly and patronizingly.

"We are *so* pleased with her, vicar. We think she's quite *wonderful*. She has learnt everything Prudence can tell her."

Carillon's honest countenance shone with satisfaction as he heard this praise of the industrious housemaid; but Violet in her confusion never observed the signs of his pleasure. Those interviews were dreadful to her; yet it was more dreadful still when he left the house without asking to see her.

"Not afraid of work, I hear," he would say cheerily. "Sticking to it in grand style. Miss Castlemayne tells me she's afraid of your doing too much."

"I really am," drawled Miss Castlemayne. "We beg her not to overdo it."

Then Mr. Carillon asked a few questions. Had she

been to see Gladys lately? Did she think that Gladys was putting on weight as well as gaining strength? Was Gladys really and truly happy with those people in whose charge he placed her after she came out of the hospital?

During one such conversation, when Violet was murmuring her grateful thanks for all he had done with regard to Gladys, he said something that made her draw a deep breath and look up at his face with large startled eyes. Dropping his voice, he had said hurriedly, "I couldn't do less for Gladys, after all *you* had done for her. If not for her own sake, it had to be done for your sake."

For days Violet carried in her ears the echo of this brief speech, feeling that somehow it had given her new hope and courage. Surely it meant something more than mere universal humanity? He would have been noble and generous to Gladys in any event, but he wished Violet to draw the inference that he had been pleased in pleasing her.

Ordinarily, however, nothing so tremendous occurred during the interview. He asked his friendly questions, speaking just as a vicar speaks to any humble resident in his parish; and very soon Miss Castlemayne gave her a hint that she could withdraw.

"And, Edith, you need not wait either. I'll see Mr. Carillon out myself."

"Very good, miss," said Edith glumly; and she dashed down into the basement, almost capsizing Violet on the steep and narrow stairs.

There was a window in the basement, just beside the front door steps, at which all the servants clustered to watch Mr. Carillon walk down the drive when at last

Miss Castlemayne permitted him to tear himself away. There they all stood, on tiptoe, feverishly excited, as if they had never watched him before. Even the kitchenmaid, scarce more than a flapper, joined in the chorus of rapturous admiration.

His chaplain's work was nearly done now, so that on some days one saw him in black coat and Roman collar, and on other days in khaki with Sam Brown belt and medal ribbons.

"There he goes," whispered the kitchenmaid. "In his clericals! I like 'em best. Yes, I do."

"Oh, turn round and give me one more look," cried Edith, kissing her hand to the retreating figure.

Old Prudence chuckled derisively.

"How you gells can go on so silly! Well, I wonder you aren't ashamed of your silliness."

"Oh, he's too lovely," Edith continued. "Oh, support me, I can't bear it."

"It's all very well, Prudence, you laughing," said Daphne the cook. "But ever since the world began there's been two forms of men sent to tantalize and delight us women. One's a soldier and the other's a clergyman. When you get them both rolled into one—well, it isn't fair. Who can resist it?"

Edith was becoming almost hysterical as Mr. Carillon neared the gates at the end of the drive. "You darling," she cried. "You lamb. You angel. Look back—just once."

But Mr. Carillon went out through the gates and never looked behind him.

He used to pass those gates early in the morning, doing his first rounds, at about the time that Violet was cleaning the front door-steps. On her knees she

saw him pass by, and her eyes once filled with tears when he had gone and she saw the gates blankly void again.

She thought of what she had lost—not that comfortable middle-class home a hundred yards away, not the pocket money, the plain wholesome food, or the golf croquet, but the treasure of this man's love. It was hers and she never valued it.

One morning she saw him at the gates in uniform, and on horseback. It was one of those days that seem to tell you that the winter is nearly over and spring-tide coming fast. No buds had yet burst on the trees, but daffodils, almond blossom, and the last of the crocuses, gave colour and life amid the dark evergreen foliage of The Cedars shrubbery; the sun shone with a tremulous brightness, and in its beautiful golden flicker the mounted officer at the gates seemed a vision that symbolized masculine perfection. In the phrase of her fellow-servant, Violet felt that it was more than she could bear. She shifted the queer little sort of praying-mat that she knelt upon, grovelled across the top step, and scrubbed wildly yet impotently.

But she had to look round when she heard the sound of the horse's hoofs on the gravel.

"Good morning," said Carillon, stopping the horse with negligent ease, and sitting there as if the saddle had been an arm-chair. "I borrowed this old skin from a pal, because I had some distance to go"; and he slapped the horse hardily, daringly.

Violet asked if he wished to see Miss Castlemayne, adding that she feared the young mistress was not yet fully dressed: but Mr. Carillon said no, he did not want to disturb anybody. Seeing Violet, he

had merely looked in to say a few words to her.

The blood rushed to Violet's head, but she hung it lower, beginning to grovel and scrub again.

"I have been so busy these last few days," he said in an explanatory tone.

"Yes, I know how busy you are," said Violet, scrubbing hard.

He did not tell her that his business nowadays related almost entirely to her own family. "Yes," he said, "very busy. By the way, I saw your sister Primrose yesterday."

"That was kind of you."

"Not a bit. She sent you her love. Primrose is going very strong. Yes, Primrose is really in immense form."

Then he leaned forward on the neck of his horse in a most reckless manner, as if wishing to get nearer to her for more confidential discourse.

"Violet! Do stop scrubbing half a minute. I say—when is your next afternoon out?"

"My afternoon out!" Violet, as she echoed the words, relinquished her brush, and knelt high upon her praying-mat. "My afternoon out is Wednesday." And she stared at him amazedly.

"Wednesday! The day after to-morrow. That'll do capitally. Now look here, I want you to spend your afternoon with me, if you don't mind—just for a walk and a talk. What time shall I come and fetch you?"

It seemed to Violet that the weak pale sunshine had suddenly blazed out with the overpowering force of tropic lands.

"What time shall I come and fetch you?" he said again.

"Three o'clock," said Violet, faintly. "But please don't come to the house. I will meet you at the top of the road. I—I don't want the servants to see you."

"What! No followers allowed?" said Carillon laughing. "Is that the rule, eh? Very well. Top of the road— Three P. M. Bye-bye till then, and don't work so hard."

He saluted, turned his horse, and cantered away. Violet thought he was galloping at full speed; she dreaded that the furious beast might overpower him, strong as he was. She sprang to her feet, and stood with a hand to her trembling lips, watching him till he had slowed down and gone through the gates safely.

On Wednesday the spring-like weather still held, and the sun shone as Violet shyly went up the road to keep her appointment. He was there—waiting for her—and they walked away together. He wore clerical garments to-day, and Violet noticed this, at first with disappointment; then the change mysteriously gave her pleasure. Perhaps because it seemed to make him, outwardly at least, closer to what he had once been.

Directly, they had turned the first corner, he stopped. "Look here," he said joyously, "I've something to show you." And he fished out of his pocket a large folded copy of the *Times* newspaper. "Splendid news, Vi. Look at this. We've done the trick for old Jack, and got him his reward at last. Here you are," and he pointed with his finger. It was a *London Gazette* with two marked entries. The former, with a date to it of a year ago, announced that Sergeant

John Welby was appointed Second Lieutenant; the latter entry, under the heading *Honours and Awards*, announced that Second Lieutenant Welby had been awarded the Military Cross.

"How splendid!" said Violet, with her eyes glowing. "How proud and pleased mother and Amabel will be! And he owes it all to you. Every bit of it."

"Bosh!" said Carillon, cheerily. "He owes it to his own merit first of all, and to a string of lucky chances afterwards. Of course it's nothing really—I mean the commission and the decoration. But in this case it's of enormous importance. Yes, it puts dear old Jack on his legs."

"How do you mean?"

"I mean that because of it the Insurance Company are going to reinstate Jack in his old position. They'll take him straight back. I settled that with them, this morning."

"I have no words to say what I think of—of—your kindness."

Carillon put the newspaper in his pocket, and they walked on.

They went far across the Common, as though unconsciously seeking some secluded spot where they could talk quietly without observation. There had been great encroachments on the Common since the dear old days; a large part was fenced in as a military camp, and much of the remainder was given over to allotment gardens; but on the further side, where a few of the stately old mansions stood unchanged behind carriage sweeps and sunk moats, they found a comfortable seat beneath tall trees, with nobody near them except an old lady reading a novel on a seat fifty

yards away. It was so pleasant and tranquil here that Mr. Carillon laid his hat upon his knees, and allowed the gentle air to play upon his forehead.

He began almost at once to talk about the parish, and he continued for some time. Violet merely listened and suffered. Somehow, all these details, although intensely interesting, were not the sort of thing that she had foolishly been expecting to hear. An immense sympathy, of course, mingled with her sharp disappointment, and she struggled hard to purify her thoughts from any selfish regret.

He told her that the work of a parish priest must necessarily be more and more arduous. The whole world had changed. New difficulties had arisen. Everybody looked at everything from a fresh point of view. Religion itself had altered, and all religious preachers and teachers must put "their backs into it"; they must "work like good 'uns" if they really meant to do their duty. "It will not be an easy life, Violet," and he drummed on the top of his hat. "It can't be an easy life. And I shall need all the help I can get in it."

"Of course. I know," said Violet, bravely; "that is—I hear you are thinking of getting married."

"Yes, I am," and he looked at her triumphantly, yet with a queer, almost whimsical expression in his face. "But how did you hear that?"

"Oh, it's common talk."

"Is it really?" He was looking away from Violet at the novel-reader on the neighbouring bench, and he saw that she had ceased to read and was surveying the landscape. "Well, common talk isn't often right, but I hope it is this time."

"When is it to be?"

"Well, that depends on the young lady." Mr. Carillon looked round, and kept his eyes on Violet's face. "Yes," he said again, "that depends on the young lady. I haven't asked her yet."

"Not asked her?"

"No. What will she say? What will *you* say? My own young lady! Violet—my queen—put me out of my misery, and say it shall be soon." He had thrown his hat away somewhere, he was opening his arms, and glancing over his shoulder at the same time. "Violet! Quick! Do it. Before that old woman looks round."

And they did it—quick enough at the start, but so slow at the finish that when the old lady looked round they were still at it. The old lady was shocked. A parson and a girl kissing in a public place! What next! Very likely just chance acquaintances too.

He went on talking—the right stuff now,—and with overpowering eloquence. "Violet, when can you ever forgive me? Oh, my dear girl, if you knew what it has cost me. When I saw your goodness, your nobility, your absolute out and out splendidity, I wanted to stop it. It was torture to me going on, but I *had* to test you, Vi. I didn't dare take things for granted. Glorious as you seemed, I felt I must know for certain. I was haunted by that hateful proverb— 'Once bitten twice shy.' "

And in one of his most exuberant outbursts he called her "queen" again, vowing that he was her slave now to the end of their days. "Not any more on your knees, Vi. No more housemaiding. We'll give our month's notice at once. No. We'll go, straightway,

and forfeit our wages!" And he laughed joyously.

Violet had been lifted into elysium. She sat with her hat slightly on one side, leaning towards him, listening to the music of his voice, and feeling that she was soaring through sunlit air.

Presently he jumped up, and they walked on again. His bliss was too great to allow him to sit still.

"Put your hat straight, Violet," he said to her, affectionately but firmly.

"Yes, dear," and she obeyed him. "Is that better?"

"Yes. That's all right." He gave her hand a squeeze, and they went on to where four paths met.

"Don't go on the grass," he said quickly. "You'll get your feet wet."

"Very well, dear," and she returned to the path-way.

"There's often some dew that one does not see. What were we speaking of?"

"There's something we shall have to speak of," said Violet, tentatively and uncomfortably. "What about Miss Castlemayne?"

"Miss Castlemayne!" he echoed, in surprise. "What about her?"

"Well," said Violet, "I'm afraid—well—aren't *you* afraid—won't she mind? Didn't she— Wasn't she——"

He laughed gaily. "Vi! You're not going to pretend you thought there was anything between us two. Why, Miss Castlemayne is engaged."

"Engaged!"

"Yes. To her cousin—Captain Tower. They're going to be spliced as soon as he gets back from the Argentine." Then he laughed again. "And you

actually thought—— Oh, absurd! Bless her heart, I count on Miss Castlemayne to be your right hand in the parish—that is, as long as she remains here.”

Violet was intensely glad. The thought of Miss Castlemayne’s agony would have spoilt her own exquisite joy.

They strolled on.

“Violet, don’t walk through the puddles.”

In her happiness Violet did not know where she was walking.

“Always look where you’re going. It’s a silly thing to walk right through a puddle. Keep in the middle of the path, and try to walk in step with me.”

“For a slave—as you called yourself,” said Violet, smiling, “how you do order one about!”

“Do I?” said Mr. Carillon, contrite and ashamed. “I’m awfully sorry. That’s a bad habit. You must stop me doing that, Vi.”

“No,” said Vi, “I shan’t stop you. I—I like it,” and she turned her large soft eyes upon him in a sort of ecstasy of submissiveness.

CHAPTER IV

ABOUT three o'clock on the following afternoon Mr. Welby, in his shirt sleeves, was giving final touches to the coffee-room tables already laid for the *table-d'hôte* dinner.

Mrs. Welby suddenly appeared at the door.

"Put on your coat, father. Sarah says there's company for you."

"Company for me?"

"It's Mr. Carillon has brought them. Hurry. Oh, I'm so excited."

Mrs. Welby had picked up the swallow-tails from the back of a chair, and as she spoke she helped her husband to get into them.

Then Sarah appeared. She, too, seemed excited.

"Old friends and happy surprises," said Sarah, smiling affectionately. "Master Jack, Miss Violet—Miss Primrose—yes, and somebody else—a stranger as yet—but we'll leave him outside for the moment. Step this way, gentlemen"; and she announced them as they entered the room. "The vicar. . . . Mr. Rolls."

"How are you, my dear Mr. Welby?" said old Rolls, shaking hands and letting his eye-glass fall to the end of the black ribbon. Time had dealt kindly with Mr. Rolls. He was a little stouter, a little heavier, a very little less pompous, but as professionally correct as ever.

Behind him the room seemed to surge with members of the Welby family—Jack, looking quite smart and

debonair in a new blue serge suit; Amabel, with eyes proudly shining; Primrose, bright, gay, quick-moving; and Violet, stately and silent. Mr. Welby's daughters kissed their father affectionately; Jack greeted him with a laugh, and a slap on the shoulder; Mr. Carillon merely beamed at him.

"Lock that door," said Sarah, pointing. "So that we shan't have people coming through from the other room. Now you sit down, dear Mr. Welby, and let Mr. Rolls talk to you."

Mr. Welby seated himself and stared at Mr. Rolls, who had moved a chair and now sat facing him.

"I will be brief," said Mr. Rolls, adjusting his eyeglass. "Mr. Welby, I have good news for you."

"I can do with a bit of good news."

"Yes, but they say that with very good news it should be broken gently, or it may be almost as dangerous as bad news."

Mr. Welby only stared at him. The face of Mrs. Welby, behind her husband's chair, was twitching, and the fingers of one hand on the back of the chair opened and shut spasmodically.

"Very well then!" And amid the profound and watchful silence of the others Mr. Rolls told his story of restitution and recovery.

"Stop," said Mr. Welby. "Hold on. I'm not taking it in. Say all that last part again."

Mr. Rolls repeated the story.

"Steady. Hold on," said Mr. Welby once more, and he murmured words that he had just heard: "Much saved after all from the wreck,— The claim allowed,— The government to refund,— The money available on demand!" Then, leaning forward, he

clutched Mr. Rolls by the arm. "Give me the figures—the plain figures."

Mr. Rolls did so.

"Now stop. Let me get my bearings, please." Mr. Welby ran his hand through his grey hair, then waved it aloft. "Why—why, this means I shall be back to pretty near where I was in the beginning." He was trembling now all over his big frame. "Mother, where are you? Have you grasped it? D'you see what it means? I shall have about the same as if I'd never lost my nest-egg."

He had staggered to his feet, and Mrs. Welby came round from the back of the chair and clung to him.

"Rolls—no catch to it?"

"No, no," said Mr. Rolls and Mr. Carillon in the same breath.

"Jack—no fun of yours? *That* I couldn't stand. Not pulling my leg?"

"No, it's rumbo, governor," said Jack. "Take it easy. Have a blow."

Gradually Mr. Welby pulled himself together; he drew himself to his full height, looked round at them all, and blew out his cheeks in a long sigh of joy.

"It means," he said, glancing round the old room, "it means that I could buy back this house if it was in the market."

"It *is* in the market," Sarah announced quietly.

"What say?"

"I say I am ready and willing to sell it for the same price I gave you—part to remain on mortgage, if you like, and such of the furniture as you want at a valuation or by mutual agreement."

"But the business—the hotel? Oh, no, Sarah. Not

to be thought of," and Mr. Welby shook his head resolutely but sadly. "I won't for one moment of time allow you to contemplate making such a quixotic sacrifice."

"Sacrifice! Nothing of the sort," said Sarah stoutly. "Listen, sir, and I'll explain my position. I don't say that in naming terms I haven't considered the pleasure I'm going to get out of it by seeing you and dear Mrs. Welby living here again in your old home. No. Naturally I'm ready to sell to you cheaper than to anyone else."

"Sarah!"

"But it's no question of knocking the business to pieces by parting with this one house out of the three. The establishment is too large—it does *not* carry the trade to justify it. You, as a business gentleman, must have seen that for yourself." And she went on to say that the two remaining houses would make a much more compact affair, and that she was going to sell it to someone that Mr. Carillon had found for her.

"It is he who has done everything," said Violet, in a low, intense voice.

"You see," said Sarah, winding up her explanation, "the war was my harvest-time. I made a tidy profit during the war. I've put it by, and I don't want to risk losing it; times aren't going to boom for ever, and I ain't as young as I was. Besides," and she looked round, smiling, "why should I? When you've got enough, why should you want more?"

"No," said Mr. Welby. "That's sound philosophy, If you put it in *that* light, Sarah, well, I must confess——"

"Come here, sir, along with me." And Sarah led

him out through the hall to the back of the house.

"See," she said, pointing here and there. "It will be so easy to make everything just as it was before you left. Take down this wood-work, and you have the verandah untouched. Block up where I've put that door in the wall."

Mr. Welby stood there, looking out into the garden. The March sunlight shone upon the brickwork of the left-hand wall and upon one half of the grass lawn, showing him that the fruit trees had been badly neglected, and that the once smooth sward was injured by the markings of the odious game known as clock-golf; but he understood that there would be no difficulty either in trimming the fruit trees or in making the turf fit for the reinstatement of the croquet hoops, and so rapid is thought that he saw it all as it would be in a couple of months from now, when he had finished it—with the plums and cherries in full blossom, the hawthorn coming out, and the laburnum about to wave its yellow plumes in the warm evening air.

When he and Sarah returned to the dining-room it was full of noise and gaiety. Everybody seemed to be talking without listening, and half of them were laughing.

Primrose had introduced another guest, a tall pale nicely-dressed young man, and, blushing and giggling, she took him by the arm and brought him across to her father.

"Mr. Welby, sir," she said, flippantly and yet with emotion, "I want you to make the acquaintance of Geoffrey Merritt."

"Any friend of yours, Prim, is a friend of mine," said Mr. Welby, scarcely knowing what he was saying.

"My best friend, father," said Primrose, laughing, as she watched them shake hands. "My life-long friend as I hope. *Twiggez-vous, mon père?*"

"Glad to meet you, sir," said Mr. Welby, with great affability.

"I can't say how much I have looked forward to this meeting," said Mr. Merritt, very shyly. "It would have occurred long ago, if—if——" And his shyness made him stop speaking altogether.

"Oh, rats," said Primrose. "Father, Geoffrey and I are engaged to be married."

Mr. Welby drew back in jovial amazement. "Well, upon my word! Without so much as by your leave or for your leave. The modern girl with a vengeance! How do you know I shall give my consent?"

"I feel," said Geoffrey Merritt, "that I am to blame."

"Mother, come here," called Mr. Welby loudly. "Have you heard this? Have you seen your new son-in-law?"

"I've seen *both* my new sons-in-law," said Mrs. Welby, bridling and smiling contentedly.

"What say?"

Mr. Carillon came forward, leading Violet by the hand.

"We also are engaged to be married," said Carillon, "and I hope you will not withhold your approval."

"No, this is too much," said Mr. Welby in boisterous rapture. "I won't have it. I put my foot down. Ha-ha," and he chuckled joyously. "You impose upon my good-nature, sir; you think that because you have placed me under an obligation you can ask for what you please. Lor', I can't pretend—or try to be funny. Carillon, my dear fellow," and he wrung the

vicar's hand, "I am overjoyed. It's all like a dream. You are the very husband we always wished for her. Oh, I'm so glad—so happy—I feel like bursting. Vi, bless you." Then he turned hurriedly to Primrose. "You, too, my dear little Prim," and he whispered to her. "What did you say was the name of your young man? Geoffrey Merritt? Just so. . . . Geoffrey—for I take that liberty—Geoffrey, my dear fellow, welcome to the family. Be worthy of her—for, believe me, you have won a prize."

"I—I—I know I have," stammered Geoffrey; "a far greater prize than my deserts warranted."

"Rats," said Primrose once more.

Meanwhile, during these transports, Sarah and Mr. Rolls had been having a little chat near the window in regard to the sale of her business. Mr. Rolls now said he must be going, and began to bid adieu to his clients.

"Mayn't I offer you some refreshment?" said Sarah, hospitably.

"No, thank you," said Mr. Rolls. "I have lunched."

"That's more than I have," said Carillon, with a laugh.

"Nor I either," said Jack.

And while Sarah escorted Mr. Rolls to the front door each in turn confessed to feeling hungry. The excitement appeared to have stimulated the appetite even of those who had had their usual mid-day meal.

"Now what I say is this," said Sarah returning. "We must celebrate it *somehow*. We'll just have the very best snack we can get on the spur of the moment, and wash it down with a glass of champagne." She had rung the bell, and she bustled to the speaking-tube by the sideboard. "Our number six. Extra Seck. I

don't say it's pre-war—but I've never received complaints about it. Any one who prefers tea can have tea."

Then one heard her giving orders to the kitchen for omelettes, cold ham, sardines, and so forth.

"I'll go down and see to it," said Mrs. Welby.

"No, you stay where you are," said Sarah. "Trust the girl for once. Besides, I'll go down myself."

Then she gave orders to the two youthful waiters, who had answered the bell.

"Put those three tables together. Make one of them. Lay eight places."

"Eight places?" said Mr. Welby. "You mean nine."

"No, there's only eight of you, sir."

"Sarah, do you mean you don't intend to sit down with us yourself?"

"I will, if you really wish it," said Sarah, beaming.

"If I really wish it!" And Mr. Welby roared at the young waiters. "Nine places."

Sarah continued to give orders.

"Get one of those placards marked *Private*, and hang it outside the door, on the handle. Say I can't see anyone, if I'm asked for. And do the tea in the lounge yourselves."

The preparations for the little feast went forward rapidly, while the reunited family chattered all together. Mrs. Welby could be heard fragmentally as her guests paid her honour.

"Geoffrey—for so I must call you—you and Prim have been sly, very sly. . . . Of course I knew I should lose them both some day or other. . . . Amabel, my dear, is it not glorious about Jack? The military cross—and the office! He goes to his desk to-morrow,

doesn't he? . . . Geoffrey, you also were in the war. And so clever at electricity, Primrose tells me. . . . Now, my dear vicar, don't think I'm neglecting you. A word in your ear. It was quite true what my husband said—always our wish. Well, you get the reward of your constancy. The course of true love never did run smooth, did it? Oh, the admiration that girl received! I mean, not only when she was going about in society but just recently, when we had fallen so low—quite embarrassing." And Mrs. Welby had a pleasant little titter. "But Vi made nothing of it. Her heart, I think, was in somebody's keeping all the time. She never changed *really*. True as the magnet to the pole."

Mr. Welby was walking about the room, talking to himself when the others did not seem to listen. His heart was overflowing. He looked at the cornice, the floor skirtings, the window latches—he was in his old home, the master of the house, the kindly chieftain of the family group. Every moment he grew more expansive, more genially important, more like his old self.

"Our friend Rolls," he said, with immense joviality, "our good friend Rolls seemed to think that happiness may kill"; and again he blew out his cheeks. "If so, then it may kill you to have a dead weight lifted off your shoulders, to have your back relieved so's you can stand up straight, to be made ten years younger than you were. That's how I feel."

"The refection is served, sir," said Sarah.

"To table—to table," cried Mr. Welby, exactly in his old style; and they all began to move towards the improvised board.

The waiters opened two bottles of wine, making two loud detonations.

"Take cover," said Jack facetiously. "Let no one attempt to go through the barrage. It will be over in twenty minutes."

"Can't we wait upon ourselves?" said Amabel.

"Yes— Yes— Yes"; and the waiters were sent from the room.

They all sat down— Mr. Welby at the head of the table, dear old Sarah facing him, Mrs. Welby on his right hand, Amabel on his left. With a delicately proprietorial smile Violet indicated to the vicar that the empty chair beside her was his proper place, and Primrose personally installed the shy Geoffrey as her own neighbour. Mr. Welby glanced at the shining happy faces.

"Hold on," he said suddenly. "One moment, please. You must all stand up again." He spoke genially yet firmly, just in the old way, as a man giving an order in his own house and expecting to be obeyed. "Stand up."

They all stood up, looking at Mr. Welby in wonder.

"Mr. Carillon!"

"Yes?"

"Will you kindly say grace."

Mr. Carillon folded his hands and looked at the tablecloth.

"For what we are about to receive may the Lord make us truly thankful."

"Amen," said Mr. Welby, with fervour.

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